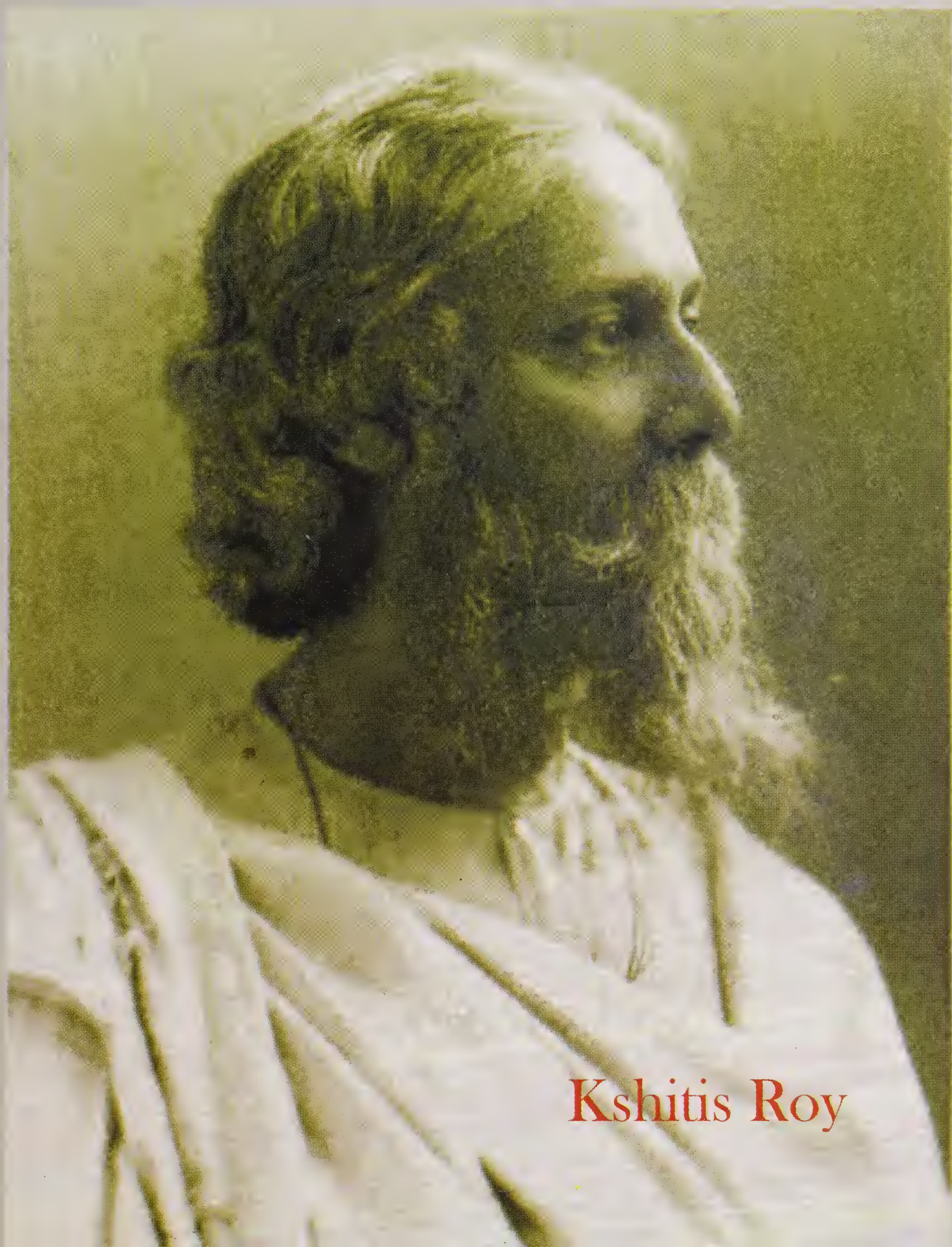
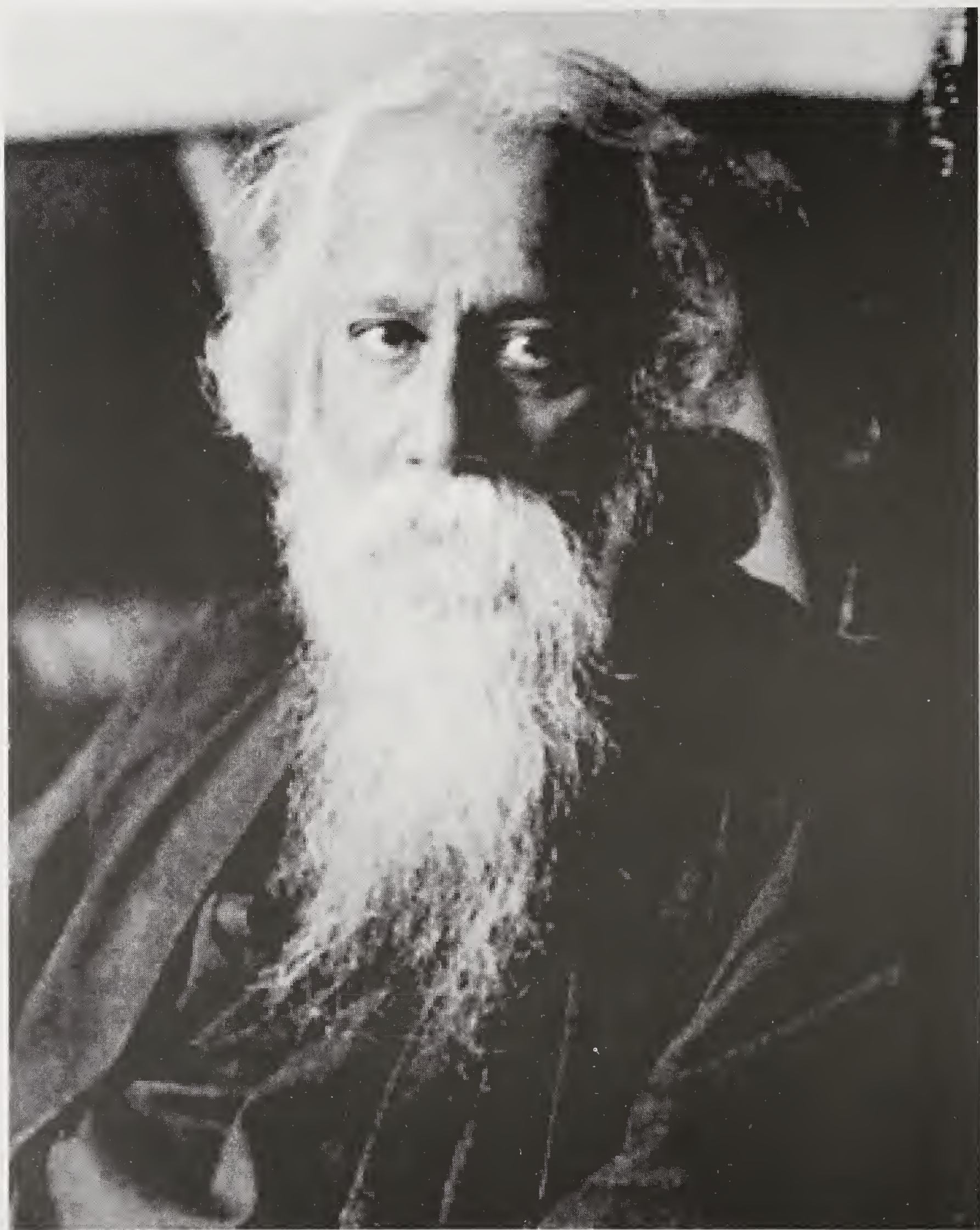


RABINDRANATH TAGORE

A Life Story



Kshitis Roy



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By
Kshitis Roy

Translated by
Lila Ray
From the original in Bengali



PUBLICATIONS DIVISION
MINISTRY OF INFORMATION AND BROADCASTING
GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

First Edition: 1961 (Saka 1883)
Fifth Edition : 2012 (Saka 1934)

© Publications Division

Price: ₹ 120/-



ISBN : 978-81-230-1764-8

BIO-ENG-REP-02-2012-13

Published by: Director General, Publications Division,
Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India
Soochna Bhawan, CGO Complex, Lodhi Road, New Delhi-110 003.

<http://www.publicationsdivision.nic.in>

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COVER DESIGN : Asha Saxena

Sales Centres : • Ambica Complex, 1st Floor, Paldi, **Ahmedabad**-380007 • 1st Floor, 'F' Wing, Kendriya Sadan, Koramangala, **Bangalore**-560034 • 'A' Wing, Rajaji Bhawan, Besant Nagar, **Chennai**-600090 • Hall No. 196, Old Secretariat, **Delhi**-110054 • Soochna Bhawan, CGO Complex, Lodhi Road, **New Delhi**-110003 • House No. 07, New Colony, Chenikuthi, K.K.B. Road, **Guwahati**-781003 • Block 4, 1st Floor, Gruhakalpa Complex, M.G. Road, Nampally, **Hyderabad**-500001 • 8, Esplanade East, **Kolkata**-700069 • Hall No. 1, 2nd Floor, Kendriya Bhawan, Sector H, Aliganj, **Lucknow**-226024 • 701, B Wing, 7th Floor, Kendriya Sadan, Belapur, **Navi Mumbai**-400614 • Bihar State Co-operative Bank Building, Ashoka Rajpath, **Patna**-800004 • Press Road, Near Govt. Press, **Thiruvananthapuram**-695001

Typeset at : Print-O-World, 2579, Mandir Lane, Shadipur, New Delhi-110 008

Printed at : I G Printers. Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi

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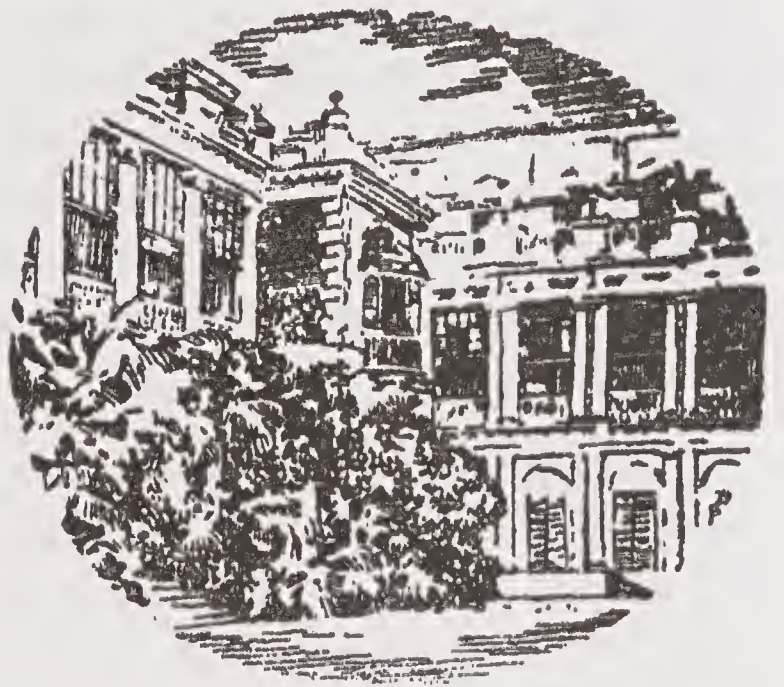
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THE 25TH OF VAISAKHA

IT was after the battle of Plassey in 1757 that Calcutta began to grow into a city. Aristocratic Bengali families built fine residence in the Pathuria-ghata-Jorasanko area beside the Ganga. One of them belongs to the Tagore family of Jorasanko. Nilmoni was the original owner. The residence is spacious and old-fashioned, comprising a number of buildings with great pillars and wide railed verandahs. Dwarkanath

Tagore's name has been given to the Chitpore lane in which it is situated.



Dwarkanath Tagore

Dwarkanath was Nilmoni's grandson. He was well-known in his day for the sumptuous style in which he lived. Although younger than Raja Ram Mohun Roy he was looked upon as a friend. Like Ram Mohun, Dwarkanath was friendly with the English and visited England. While there, he spent lavishly and his regal manner earned for him the honorific of prince. Dwarkanath hoped to expand his business activities under the patronage of Queen Victoria. But man proposes and God disposes. He died in London in 1846 after a single day's illness. His eldest son, Debendranath, was 29 years old at that time.

Debendranath's thoughts had been occupied with religious matters from his boyhood. He was not very much interested in wordly affairs. On the death of his father he was forced to shoulder the burden of a very large joint family. Dwarkanath's extravagance in England had involved him heavily in debts. A number of his businesses wound up. Creditors pressed hard. Debendranath sold off all the appurtenances of luxury, but the sum that he was able to raise was insufficient. Nearly a crore of rupees had been taken as loan by his father. No written record had been kept of some of these transactions. His father had also promised handsome contributions to many good causes. Debendranath could not be held legally responsible for them. But how could he refuse to honour his father's obligations? The creditors agreed unanimously to give him time. Little by little Debendranath cleared his father's debts to the last penny.

The payment of his father's debts was, for Debendranath, a kind of penance. He denied himself. Day after day he concentrated upon bringing the family affairs into order. In 1843, some time before his father's death, he had adopted the monotheistic creed preached by Ram Mohun Roy. Belief in one true universal godhead, Brahma, sustained Debendranath during this period of crisis and fortified his strength. The integrity and forcefulness of his character and his profound religious faith won him the honorary title of Maharshi, the Great Sage. The family residence at Jorasanko is now known as the Maharshi Bhavan.

At last the family affairs were straightened out. The Maharshi

turned his thoughts once again to the practice of religion. He frequently sought solitude in distant places, leaving the bustle and noise of Calcutta for the seaside, the mountains and the banks of distant rivers. It was during this period, in 1861, that Debendranath's fourteenth child, Rabindranath, was born to Sarada Devi on the 7th of May at Jorasanko. According to the Bengal calendar the date was the 25th of Vaisakha, 1268. In remembrance of that auspicious day conch shells sound and thousands of voices now sing every year:



Debendranath Tagore

The ever-new was summoned
By the twenty-fifth of Vaisakha.....

CHILDHOOD

THE Tagore family was living a simple life at the time of Rabindranath's birth. The children did not have too many playthings. They dressed in simple cotton. Rabindranath did not even have the care and affection of his mother. Sarada Devi was the head of a large household. How could she find time to cuddle her youngest son?

Rabindranath, an elder brother Somendranath, and his sister's son Satya Prasad passed into the care of servants in the outer apartments. Rabindranath was four at the time. Satya Prasad and Somendranath were both two years older than him.

One of the servants was named Shyam. His task was to keep an eye on the children. He restricted the movements of the boys in order to lighten his labour. There were days when he would shut Rabindranath up alone in a room, draw a circle with chalk around him and frighten him by saying: "Step outside this circle at your peril!" The boy, remembering what happened to Sita when she trespassed outside her charmed circle, would pass the entire day in the closed room, seated quietly beside the window. Through the narrow openings between the wooden shutters he could see a masonry bathing ghat and a pond. To the east of the pond was an ancient banyan with trailing roots, and to the south, a row of coconut palms. People frequented the bathing ghat from early morning until noon. Each had his own characteristic way of bathing. Rabindranath watched them. To him the outside world was mysterious and strange.

The head servant was Brajeswar. At one time he had been a primary school teacher. He was sedate and dignified, his language, literary. And he was an opium addict. Milk is a necessity for those who take opium. Brajeswar's duty was to attend to the meals of the children. He kept more milk for himself than he served the boys. One good quality he did have. He read the Ramayana and the Mahabharata aloud to the other servants in the evening by the light of an oil lamp.

Seated on a torn reed mat in a corner of the room, the boy Rabindranath listened with rapt attention to the stories of Ram and Sita, Bhima and Arjun. He liked the story of Kush and Lava best of all. What if they were only boys? They fought and defeated their famous father and uncles in battle!

The children had no place in the world of the grown-ups, neither in the men's apartments nor in the women's. There were no cinemas in those days nor theatres, and not even a football match to amuse and divert. The older people chatted with their friends and guests in the outer apartments. If a child dared to approach them, he was bidden to run away and play. And if the children were as noisy as children ought to be they were ordered to keep quiet.

The grown-up world and the outside world both were beyond the reach of the boy Rabindranath. Perhaps that was the reason the world of his imagination was so real to him. In this world the robbers Raghu and Bisu, fairy-tale princes, witches and demons were as real as the Ramayana.

On holidays Shyam took a nap after lunch. Rabi found the opportunity to sit in the ancient palanquin which was kept on the verandah. He shut the doors. The motionless palanquin moved, journeying through distant lands. Sometimes the way led through dense forests. The eyes of tigers flared. An eerie feeling of fear gripped him. Again the palanquin became a peacock boat and floated with him over the seas. Oars dipped rhythmically into the water and waves rocked him as they rose and fell.

This imaginative child dreamt of climbing to the very top of heaven, placing ladder atop another ladder, and of driving one bamboo after another down into the earth in order to descend to the nethermost depths.

The beauty of the earth moved him profoundly. He would run to the garden as soon as he woke up in the morning. The fragrance of grass wet with dew, rose up around him as the first rays of light caressed the heads of the coconut palms. To Rabi the garden was a heavenly place.

The day he spelled out for the first time in the home school held in the outer apartments, "Rain falls, Leaves move", the rhythm and lilt of the lines kept leaves quivering and the rain pattering through his heart the whole day. The thrill felt by the poet when he wrote his first poem seemed to throb in his heart.

SCHOOL

ON the completion of their studies in the home school, Somendra and Satya were admitted to the Oriental Seminary. They drove to the Seminary every day in a carriage. When they came home, they gave Rabindranath, glowing accounts of the outside world. What a wonderful world it was! One day Rabi cried to be sent to school. The teacher of the home school slapped him on the cheek and said: "You will cry harder not to go to school some day than you are crying to go to school today."

Very true, two days at school convinced Rabi that there was not much difference between Shyam's magic circle in the closed room and this big partitioned box. In school he did not even have any opportunity to peep out at the world through shutters, and colour it to his fancy.

The fact that likes and dislikes form a large part of the child's mind was completely ignored. School was a daily sentence to hard labour from ten o'clock in the morning to four in the afternoon in a heartless prison. The walls stood there, as vigilant and unyielding as policemen.

If a boy was unable to recite his lesson, he was made to stand on a bench and slates were stacked on the palms of his hands. Some of the teachers were canes incarnate. Nor was the speech or behaviour of the boys such that Rabi could be at ease in their company. He spent the lunch time with the servant, sitting beside a window that opened on to the road from a room in the first storey.

The Tagore boys were not at the Seminary for long. They were taken out and put in the Normal School. Rabi now came under a strict study routine. From morning to night the relentless wheels revolved. The person whose duty it was to keep the machine wound up at home was the third brother, Hemendranath. He was seventeen years older than Rabi. After setting the routine, he took upon himself the task of teaching the boys many things.

Hemendranath used to say something that is very true about education. A sound grounding in the mother-tongue should come first,

and the teaching of English later. At that time it was a fashion to teach through the medium of English. Rabi benefited greatly from the understanding his third brother showed in teaching the boys through the medium of Bengali over a long period of time. Rabi did not have to memorise things he did not understand. His mind was exercised freely in many ways as he studied and learned. Later he wrote that learning is like eating. If the first bite is tasty and appetising, digestion follows easily and naturally. The hunger for knowledge dies before the pupil can bite through the hard rules of grammar, if he has to learn through a foreign language.

But what if he was taught through the medium of Bengali? How could a boy of ten or twelve enjoy a strictly regulated existence according to routine from dawn to dusk? Winter and summer he had to be up before dawn. Clad only in a loin cloth he had to wrestle with the professional wrestler who taught the boys. Slipping a tunic over his dusty body, he then took his place in the study room to work without a break from six o'clock in the morning to nine-thirty. The same teacher taught the boys Geometry, Arithmetic, Bengali, History, Geography, Physics, Logic and Biology. From ten o'clock till four they were at school. No sooner did they return home than a tutor arrived to teach them drawing and gymnastics. Aghore Babu, a medical student, came to them in the evening. By that time they were thoroughly tired both in mind and body. With the help of a skeleton that hung in their study room he taught them anatomy. He also taught them English. Both subjects were dull and difficult. As evening set in and the light flickered, their eyes drooped drowsily over the thick English textbook bound in black. Sometimes their eldest brother, Dwijendranath, noticed their plight as he passed and set them free. Sleep immediately departed.

Even on Sundays they did not have the whole day off. But their Sunday studies were different. In the morning the family musician, Bishnu, taught them devotional songs and sometimes light popular songs also. Sometimes a science teacher came to show them simple experiments with the help of a scientific apparatus. The days when he did not come seemed wasted.

There was only one Sunday a week. How was Rabi to find relief from the monotony of routine on other days? The tutors were never ill and never absent. The pupils were obliged to fall ill. But Rabi had such excellent health that nothing he did would bring on an illness. When

soaking himself in the rain and walking barefoot over dew-wet grass failed to produce even a sniffler, let alone a cold, he was obliged to go to his mother and say, "I've got the tummyache." His mother smiled to herself but she called the servant and said: "Tell the tutor he need not teach Rabi any more today." This truant had only one game: he played at being a teacher. The pupils were the wooden palings of the verandah railing. He sat down to teach them stick in hand. There was no doubt at all in the mind of the small teacher as to which of his pupils was clever, which good and which naughty. The beatings the stupid and the naughty got!

Rabi, it is true, did not enjoy text-books, he was well up in Bengali because he had read so much in that language before going to school. At the annual examination of the Normal School he got the highest marks. The class teacher said: "A boy who has not studied all the year cannot possibly stand first. He has been given high marks deliberately because he is from a wealthy family." The examination was held a second time in the presence of the Superintendent. Rabi got the highest marks again.

His studies at the Normal School came to an end quite suddenly, at the wish of the Maharshi, when Rabi was about eleven years old. Somendra, Satya and Rabi began to attend an Eurasian school called the Bengal Academy. The Academy boys were certainly naughty, but their company was not disgusting. Rabi felt annoyed but not soiled. Writing the word 'ass' in the reverse on the palm of his hand, one boy would slap another on the back with hearty 'hello' or a boy would smash a banana over the head of another or slap him quickly on the cheek and look away with an innocent air. But such childish tricks left no permanent imprint on the mind.

English was the medium of instruction at the Bengal Academy. Many of the boys could not understand the teachers and they made no attempt to do so. It was a small, expensive school. The boys who attended it came from rich families and paid their dues regularly at the end of every month. The Director, Mr. De Cruz, considered that sufficient. The Tagore boys did not like the school. The person who helped them most in their efforts to escape it, was their Persian tutor, Munshiji. Whenever they asked him he wrote out an application for a holiday, and the holiday was granted without any comment, whether or not the Saheb understood the English in which the application was written.

One of Rabi's cousins, a boy about five years older than he was, Jyotiprakash, called him into his room one day and showed him how a line of verse in Bengali is built out of fourteen syllables. He said: "You must write poetry."

A blue notebook was procured for him through the good offices of an employee of the household treasury. The notebook accompanied him everywhere in his pocket. The terror he had felt at first gradually abated. The rhythm of the fourteen syllables became familiar. The blue notebook slowly filled with lines of uneven writing in a large, childish scrawl. Somendra took infinite pride in these compositions. He accosted anybody and everybody and said: "Rabi has written a poem. Listen" No one escaped, from the treasury employee to the friends and guests of the elder boys.

Rabi's reputation as a poet finally reached the school. The headmaster of the Normal School called him one day and asked: "You write poetry, do you?" The boy blushingly confessed it was true. The headmaster composed two lines one day:

*When the sun was scorching everybody
Hope of rain dispelled their fear.*

He asked Rabi to complete the verse by the addition of two more lines. Rabi wrote:

*The fish which cowered in the bottom of the pond
Rose to the surface and splashed about happily.*

Govinda Babu, the Superintendent of the school, came to know of Rabi's talent through the headmaster. He was a short, stout gentleman of grave demeanour — approaching Rabi one day during the interval, he asked the boy to write a poem on a high moral precept. The following day he was delighted with Rabi's effort. He led him into the senior most class of the school at once and said: "Read this out to these big boys." After hearing the poem the big boys commented "He has copied it from some book. It cannot be his own composition" Rabi had already won first place in his Bengali examination. Now Govinda Babu acclaimed the poet in this boy, the youngest of the Tagores.

Song came to Rabi hand in hand with poetry. Bishnu had taught him devotional Brahmo songs and some lighter popular songs also when he was very young. Earlier still, when Rabi used to listen to the

reading of the Ramayana in the evenings, Kishori Chatterjee, who was the Maharshi's personal assistant, would occasionally storm into the room singing Dasarathi Ray's *Panchali*:

*Lakshman. O hear me
Greatly I fear me
Dangers are near me.*

Two of Rabi's elder brothers, Hemendra and Jyotirindra, were great lovers of music. So were their friends. His cousins, Gajendra and Gunendra, were both well-known drama critics and patrons of the theatre. When he grew up Rabindranath wrote: "I do not remember a time when I could not sing". The doors of the Tagore residence were open to talented musicians of the day. They were all welcomed, the known and the unknown. Jadu Bhatta, a famous *ustad*, came to stay with the family for some time when Rabi was a little older. He insisted upon teaching Rabi how to sing. It was a mistake. The result was that the boy, so averse to a regime of rigid rule, never practised music according to the classical canon.

Rabi did not want to learn how to sing. Song came to him naturally. He found it in the atmosphere of the house. Srikantha Sinha of Raipur was the person who was his real teacher, helping him most in the task of making music his own. Sinha, as an admirer of the Maharshi, came to visit frequently at Jorasanko. He was a devout soul and as happy with music as a baby. He did not teach, he gave. When he could no longer contain his joy he would stand up and dance about as he played his sitar. His eyes would dilate and shine with pleasure. He sang:

*Let me go. Set me free.
O flute-player of Braja!*

Rabi had to join in the singing.

Srikantha was an enthusiastic admirer of Rabindranath's poetry. One day he showed the Maharshi one of his hymns. The poem lamented the sorrows and trials of wordly life in the traditional manner. The Maharshi is said to have been highly amused that the sorrows of the world should have so early moved his youngest son to the point of versification.

The Maharshi loved hearing Rabi sing devotional songs. He said: "Rabi is the bulbul of Bengal."

Rabi, Somendra and Satya received their sacred threads when Rabi was eleven years old. The ceremony was performed according to ancient Vedic rites. The three of them, their heads shaven, were confined in a room on the third floor for three days. It was great fun. They laughed at each other's shaven head and pulled each other's ear-rings. A drum lay in a corner of the room. They pounded the drum whenever Shyam or any other servant passed within sight of the third floor verandah. The servants inadvertently looked up and catching sight of the boys, dropped their heads and hurried off in fear of having committed an offence. The three young initiates rolled on the floor with laughter. A very particular privilege they enjoyed during these three days was that they were served with the prescribed food cooked by Kadambari Devi, the young bride of Jyotirindranath. It was delicious.

The serious side of the sacred thread ceremony, the learning and recitation of the Gayatri mantra, impressed Rabi profoundly. He was not of an age to understand the full meaning of the mantra or realise its mystery. Yet there were days when, as he recited it to himself while he sat in a corner of their study room, tears poured down his eyes. Many things take place in the depths of the mind and the heart when we are very young which cannot be explained by reason.

The problem of returning to the Eurasian school with shaven pates now presented itself. It was for the children a serious problem. It was solved for Rabi quite unexpectedly, when the Maharshi announced that he was to accompany him on his forthcoming trip to the Himalayas. His heart shouted with joy. Now, at last, he was really to see the outside world. In order to escape the ravages of dengue fever the whole family had gone to a riverside villa at Panihati for sometime and Rabi had accompanied them, but he was not allowed out of the house even there. He had spent the days sitting under a quince tree in the yard, gazing at the Ganga.

What was Panihati to compare with the Himalayas! This time he was to be away for four whole months! And his father's company was an added attraction. Rabi had seen the Maharshi only from a distance. When Rabindranath was young, the Maharshi was seldom at Jorasanko, but a link had been established between the father and the son through letters. Rabi was eight or nine years old when a rumour circulated in Calcutta that the Russians were about to overrun Tibet and invade India across the Himalayas. The Maharshi was in the Himalayas and

Sarada Devi grew anxious. When she found that the older boys were not concerned she called Rabi and said: "Write a letter to your father telling him about the Russians." Rabi's first letter to his father conveyed to him his mother's solicitude. His father's reply came in due course: "There is no cause for anxiety. If the Russians come I'll drive them out." The answer vastly increased Rabi's confidence in his father and his own courage in relation to him. From that time on he wrote letters to his father daily without either addressing them or stamping them. Only the treasury employee knew whether they were ever actually sent to their destination. But writing letters from a distance and actual proximity are not the same. Rabi noticed that whenever his father came home the house was pervaded by a sense of awe and some trepidation. Old and young all conducted themselves in a manner that showed regard for the master. The Maharshi, as unapproachable as the peaks of Himayalayas, sent for Rabi one day and asked him: "Do you want to go to the mountains with me?" If the word 'yes' could have been shouted loud enough to rend the skies, Rabi's feelings at the moment would have had adequate expression.

JOURNEY TO THE MOUNTAINS

THE Maharshi ordered new clothes for Rabi. He had to put a velvet cap embroidered with gold thread on his shaven pate. The first stage of their journey was to be spent at Bolpur. Ten or twelve years earlier the Maharshi had purchased a site suitable for secluded meditation, not far from Bolpur and built a two-storeyed house there. The name of the house was Santiniketan.

Satya Prasad had visited Bolpur with his parents a short time before. He related the story of his journey to Rabi at great length, mingling truth with fiction. He told him that to ride in a train is a most terrible experience. If one's foot slips, one is mashed like a potato. Rabi was quite frightened when they reached the station. But the train moved swiftly and safely. To ride in it was easy. He was almost disappointed at the absence of danger.

Rabi sat beside the window, looking at villages surrounded by cool shadows that were like pictures and at the fields of paddy that spread to the horizon. The train reached Bolpur in the evening. The Santiniketan house and the country around it had been described by Satya in glowing and romantic terms. When Rabi got into the palanquin he closed his eyes for he was afraid he might behold the amazing place first by the indistinct light of evening. The joy of seeing it for the first time by the full light of day would be diminished.

The Santiniketan which he beheld on waking the next morning bore very little resemblance to Satya's description. But he was completely satisfied with what he saw. The open country blended with the sky and a path led across it. Lines of palms stood like sentinels on the north. Gravelly eroded land lay to the west.

To the east of the house was a mound of earth the size of a small hillock. Every day at dawn the Maharshi seated himself at a simple altar built on top of it and performed his prayers. He watched the sunrise. Then he returned to the house and taught Rabi English and Sanskrit. After that the boy enjoyed unrestricted freedom. The servants

did not lord over him. His third eldest brother was not there with his strict routine. No magic circle was drawn anywhere on the open uplands.

It was late in February. The cold had lessened but a chill remained in the air. Rabi would set forth in the sweet light of early morning. The place he liked to go to was the eroded land. He filled the skirt of his dhoti with pebbles and stones of different shapes and sizes. His father was pleased and said:

“ Splendid! Where did you find them?”

“There are lots more. Thousands and thousands! I can bring you some every day.”

“In that case decorate my little hill with them for me.”

In one place the land had been eroded into a deep hole in which water collected. The water brimmed over in a stream which flowed across the sand. One day the boy Robinson Crusoe said to his father: ‘I have found a most beautiful stream. Why can’t we have our water brought from it?’ His father answered: “That will be very nice.” Arrangements were made that very day to fetch water from the pool.

The Maharshi gave various tasks to the boy in order to awaken his sense of responsibility. Rabi had to copy out several verses from the *Bhagavat Gita* every day. In the evening, under the open sky, the Maharshi told him about the stars and planets, explaining their movements. Rabi had to write out the next day what he was told and show what he had written. It was Rabi’s duty to wind the expensive gold watch. So zealous was his care of it that before long the watch had to be sent to Calcutta for repairs. The Maharshi gave his son three or four annas a day. When they met a beggar on their morning walk he would say: “Give him something”. Often the boy’s accounts did not tally when he added up the day’s expenses in the evening. One day there was a surplus! The Maharshi laughed and said: “It appears I shall have to make you my cashier. Money grows in your hands.”

Rabi was by now a full-fledged poet. The worn blue notebook was gone. A diary with a glossy binding had taken its place. In order to write, a poet now required a congenial environment. He sat down at the foot of a young coconut tree in the western corner of the garden, stretched his legs out on the hard ground and in the noon sun, composed a heroic poem called, “The Defeat of Prithvi.”

Resuming their journey they reached Amritsar about the middle of March, stopping at several places on the way. At one of the larger stations a ticket collector became doubtful about Rabi's half-ticket. This boy, tall and slender, made taller by the velvet cap he wore, could not possibly be less than twelve years old. Lacking the courage to say anything himself the ticket collector brought the station-master. The station-master was an Englishman. he questioned the Maharshi:

"Is this boy not more then twelve years old?"

"No."

"Full fare must be paid for him."

The Maharshi's eyes flamed. He took a currency note out of his box at once. When the change was brought to him he flung it back in disgust. The money clattered down on the station platform. The station-master dropped his head in embarrassment and turned away.

While in Amritsar the father and son walked together nearly every morning to the Golden Temple of the Sikhs in the centre of the lake. The Maharshi sat among the worshippers and sometimes, took part in their hymn-singing. It surprised and pleased the Sikhs to hear their hymns sung in their own language by this saintly Bengali. They made a fuss over the Maharshi and when Rabi left the temple they gave him sacramental rock candy and *halwa*.

After spending a month or so in Amritsar they proceeded to Dalhousie. The Himalayas at last!

They found accomodation in a bungalow situated in the highest part of Bakrota. This was the first time that Rabi had seen real mountains. He had only played with the hillock at Santiniketan and the stream in the eroded land. Here was the monarch of mountains, the Himalayas! It was still cold in the month of April. The ice had not yet melted in many places. Father and son would set out together after their morning prayers. It was not easy for Rabi to keep up with his father. Many grown-ups found it difficult, what could the boy do? Somewhere on the way Rabi would give up and take a short cut back to the bungalow.

An hour or so was spent in studying of English and Sanskrit after his father returned. The Maharishi had a special way of teaching Sanskrit. He encouraged Rabi to read Valmiki's Ramayana in the

original, while he studied grammar. Composition in Sanskrit was an additional task.

When his studies were over Rabi bathed in ice cold water and drank a bowl of hot milk immediately afterwards.

During the middle of the day he was free to roam the mountain as he liked, taking with him an iron-shod staff. The Maharshi evinced no anxiety and placed no obstacles in his way. He knew that too much solicitude is injurious to the healthy development of a child. If a child is to be strong in body and mind, he should be made to rely upon himself from an early age. Below the bungalow was a thickly-wooded spur. Some of the trees in it were like giant demons. In the heavy, chilly darkness Rabi felt his flesh creep and enjoyed it.

The Maharshi had two chairs carried out in front of the bungalow in the evening. Father and son sat beneath the clear sky and watched the stars appear one by one, astonishingly brilliant. The Maharshi taught the boy their names and discussed astronomical theories with him. Then they went up to the glass-enclosed verandh and sat down to their evening prayers. Rabi would sing devotional songs one after another. The Maharshi listened silently with bowed head, his hands folded in his lap.

The Maharshi sent Rabi back to Calcutta with his personal attendant, Kishori Chatterjee, several months later. This time he had a full ticket, for Rabi completed his twelfth year that May and he now had a heavy shock of hair. Abounding health had improved his looks and his cheeks were like apples. Englishmen who got into the train during the journey made a fuss over him.

Rabi came home a different person after these four or five months with his father. He no longer had a shy, shrinking air. The servants stopped ordering him about. He now went in and out of the inner apartments, where his mother reigned, without let or hindrance. Kadambari Devi invited him frequently to feasts on the festive occasions of her doll's weddings. Everybody was eager to hear tales of the master and of the Himalayas from the young traveller. Rabi related stories of his travels to his mother, sang songs and astonished everybody by discussing astronomical matters. One day he overwhelmed his mother by reciting to her a passage from Valmiki's Ramayana. She called everybody, saying: "Come and listen to Rabi! He can recite the Ramayana

in Sanskrit!" His interest in returning to school decreased in proportion to the greater attention he received at home. He did not want to go back to the Bengal Academy. His eldest brother, Dwijendranath, therefore sent him to St. Xavier's School.

The only pleasure Rabi associated with St. Xavier's School and remembered as he grew older was his association with Father De Penerenda. The Father's English pronunciation was poor because he was a Spaniard. The Eurasian boys made him the butt of their jokes. The Father put up with them smilingly. Teaching, for him, was not the job of a taskmaster. It was a like a holy service. One day he asked the boys to write something in class. He noticed that Rabi's pen was not moving. he came up behind him and placed a hand affectionately upon his back, saying.

"Are you not well. Tagore?"

But Rabi did not like St. Xavier's School. His elder brothers gave up when all their efforts to school him failed. His elder sister Saudamini remarked sadly: "We had all hoped Rabi would grow up to be a man but he has disappointed us." His name was struck off the school rolls and a tutor was engaged to teach him at home. One of his tutors used new methods in teaching. Observing Rabi's interest in literature he read aloud to him both Kalidasa's *Sakuntala* and *Kumarasambhava*. He explained the meaning in Bengali as he read. And every day he also read a part of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* to the boy, explaining as he went along. He kept Rabi in the study room until he had translated a selected passage into Bengali. The entire play was translated in this way. Then the teacher, in order to encourage his pupil, took him to Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar. The translation pleased Iswar Chandra and he praised the boy lavishly.

When Rabi was about fourteen his mother died. He woke one morning to hear that she was no longer in this world. With eyes still clouded with sleep he came out to the verandh and saw his mother lying on a cot. The Maharshi was standing beside her, watching as flowers were heaped on the bier and sandalwood paste rubbed on the dead woman's forehead. His mother appeared to be sleeping among the flowers piled around her.

When the bier passed through the main gate on the shoulders of the bearers, Rabi realised that his mother would never enter the house

again. His whole being sobbed with grief. He followed his elder brother to the cremation ground. At noon, when they returned, Rabi saw his father seated in silent prayer on the verandah of the third storey.

Kadambari, the wife of Jyotirindranath, took charge of the motherless boy.

After his mother's death all talk of sending Rabi to school ceased. But he did not stop studying. Most of the Bengali periodicals and books published at that time came to the Tagore household. Rabi read everything he could lay his hands on, readable and unreadable. If he had no opportunity to read them openly, he read them secretly. Sometimes he would read late into the night. The whole neighbourhood grew hushed and still while he read on by the feeble light of a single wick burning in the oil of the lamp. At one or two in the morning an exclamation would break the stillness. "My Goodness! What on earth!" Rabi's eldest sister, waking up, had seen the light. She would take his book away and send him off to bed.

Rabi's studies expanded enormously once he was freed from the imprisoning routine of school.

A BUDDING POET

RABI made his public debut as a poet a month before his mother's death. On the 11th of February, 1875, Rabi read a poem of his own composition at a meeting of the Hindu Mela. He stood beneath a tree as he read:

*In a rocky seat on a Himalayan peak
The sage Vyas sits with his veena
Forests and Mountains and Peaks
And the cold frosty wind
Tremble as he sings
And plucks the veena's strings.*

The editor of the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* named the poem. "The Gift of the Hindu Mela", and circulated it widely.

The Hindu Mela was founded by the enterprise of the Tagore family when Rabi was seven years old. Its object was to preach love for all things Indian. This was perhaps the first organised attempt to awaken a sense of Indian nationhood.

Following the example set by the Maharshi the members of the Tagore family developed a genuine regard for the religion, the literature, the music and the art of their own country. Rabindranath's elder brothers were all deeply attached to things Indian. They did more than dress and live in the Indian manner. The foremost among them was Jyotirindranath. Jyotirindranath and Rajnarain Bose founded an association called the *Sanjivani Sabha*. It met in a tumbledown building in an obscure Calcutta lane. Its secret code name, known only to members, was 'Hanchu Pamu Haph'. Very probably the main objective of the society was the elimination of the British and political liberation of India. The work of the society was carried on behind closed doors, in the dark, in silence, by the light of a candle set in the eye-socket of a skull, to the murmur of mantras from the Rig Veda. In the rites much that was exciting and mysterious would have been regarded as childish by older people. But Rajnarain Bose was elderly and he was the

chairman. An inexperienced and immature boy like Rabi was a member. He was also the official poet. Old Rajnarain waved his hands and joined in the singing of their anthem as loudly and as enthusiastically as the others:

*By a single thread are bound our thousand hearts
To a single task are given thousands of lives.*

It was composed by the young Rabindranath.

A few words must be said here about the atmosphere of the Tagore household at this time. The family was animated by a deep religious fervour, a love for literature and music, and by patriotic feeling. The older sons were all cultured and accomplished. The most talented people of the time frequented their house. The family was a large one and Rabi was the youngest.

The eldest son, Dwijendranath, was twenty-one years older than Rabi. He was a most amazing person, as simple and self-absorbed as a child and at the same time, a poet of much excellence, a philosopher and mathematician. His laughter was so wholehearted and so loud that it made the whole house ring with gaiety. He was an expert swimmer and was able to cross the swift Ganga with ease. He plunged into the fashioning of new poetic metres and the composition of new verse forms when Rabi was twelve or thirteen years old. He spent part of every day composing the *Swapna Prayan* (The Dream Journey). Each part was read out to the whole family as soon as it was written.

In this poem the poet introduces himself and his family in the following manner:*

*Where the truth is resplendent gold
And the hero exults in his valour
Where the brightness of the virtuous
Dispels the darkness of the heart
Where sun and moon shine with a new glory
The poet light his lamp. His dwelling
Is the abode of the gods.*

*The puns in this poem are as follows;

truth:Satyendranath,
gold:Hemendranath,
hero:Birendra,
brightness:Jyotrindra,

virtuous:Gunendranath,
sun:Rabindranath,
moon:Somendra,
gods:Devendra.

Satyendranath, the second brother, was nineteen years older than Rabi.

While Rabi was still a child, Satyendranath passed the I. C. S. examination in England and returned to India as the first Indian Civil Servant under the British Raj. When he left to take up his duties in Bombay he amazed everybody in the family and the neighbourhood by taking his wife, Jnanadanandini Devi, with him in an open car. Satyendranath brought a breath of freedom into the inner apartments of the Tagore household.

Of Hemandranath we have already spoken. He studied in the Medical College for some time. Birendra was a little younger than Hemendra. Gunendra was Rabi's first cousin and fourteen years older. His sense of beauty was highly developed and his ability to recognise talent, keen. He was the most appreciative reader of the poems which slowly filled the blue notebook of the young poet. He taught Rabi the history of India by telling him stories. Gunendranath's sons, Abanindranath and Gaganendranath, became famous painters.

Jyotirindranath was nicknamed the 'new' brother. The name was appropriate. Rabi was as intimate with him as a friend of the same age, although he was twelve years older. The traditional barriers between the older and younger were completely removed. Hemendranath had tried to educate Rabi by means of a rigid and rigorous routine combined with the study of a wide variety of subjects. If Rabi had been an ordinary boy, that training might have been adequate. But he was not ordinary and he could not really begin to learn until he was given the freedom to study as he pleased. Jyotirindranath's own temperament and experience enabled him to understand Rabi and show him how to teach himself. He was 'new' in spirit and mind, not only in name. And his wife Kadambari Devi was a fit companion for him. Jnanadanandini was the first to come out of seclusion and Kadambari, encouraged by her husband, rode on horseback with him on the Calcutta maidan. The effect of these two women on Rabindranath's mind was deep and lasting.

The Maharshi came to Jorasanko less frequently after the death of his wife. His last years were spent in a house on Park Street. Saudamini, his eldest daughter, looked after him. Jyotirindra moved into the room on the third storey which the Maharshi vacated. His wife went with him although it was situated in the outer apartments. This was a

strange and unprecedented thing to do. Rabi was given a room not far from theirs.

A piano appeared on the third storey. Jyotirindranath would run his fingers over the keys and pour out melodies in new and newer modes. Rabi used to sit by his side. His task was to trap the melodies as they emerged, holding them with words. Song was born. Like the waters of a fountain the melodies came streaming, multi-faceted, flowing.

Rabi found all he needed for the growth and development of his powers not only in music but in all other things as well in his brother's company. Jyotirindra never stopped him from speaking and answered all his questions attentively. Jyotirindranath himself, in his memoirs, tells us of one incident.

Jyotirindranath had just completed a play, "*Sarojini*", the subject of which was the custom of self-immolation practised by Rajput women of royal families. Rabi was fourteen year old. He was studying Sanskrit at home under Pandit Ramasarvasva. The galley proofs of the play had come from the press. While Jyotirindranath corrected the proofs the Pandit read the drama aloud. Rabi, putting a stop to his studies, was listening from the next room. A passage in prose just at the point where the Rajput women are about to hurl themselves on to the flaming pyre sounded something like a lecture. Jyotirindranath realised that prose was out of place at such a time, he hesitated. Let me relate what happened after that in words of Jyotirindranath himself:

"Young Rabi appeared in our room. He said that poetry and only poetry was capable of holding the play together at this point. I could not ignore his suggestion. but where was the time to act on it? He quickly composed the song:

Burn. O pyre! Burn!
Doubly bright! Doubly bright!

We were delighted with it."

The song was incorporated in the play and is there today, as witness of what took place.

Rabi accompanied Jyotirindranath wherever he went. Once the business of the *zamindari* took them to Shelaidah. A racing pony was found for Rabi. Every afternoon the horse had to be given a good run.

Rabi galloped desperately over the uneven ground, and he accompanied Jyotirindra, riding on an elephant during a tiger hunt.

While at Shelaidah, Rabi got the idea of making ink from the crushed petals of flowers. He wished to use it for the writing of poetry, instead of the ordinary ink. He even designed a gadget to extract the juice. When Rabi told him about, it Jyotirindranath might have smiled to himself but he sent for a carpenter immediately and ordered him to make the machine according to Rabi's specification. It was not his fault if the device failed to produce flower juice in the required quantities.

The relationship between Rabi and Kadambari Devi was of a different nature. She was only two years older. In those days girls were married young and turned into housewives at an early age. When Kadambari Devi first came into the family as a bride she still played with dolls. Her young brother-in-law was often invited to join her games. Then he was promoted by degrees. The sister-in-law set him to keep watch over the mango juice she put in the sun to dry, to shred areca nuts and to care for the garden of potted plants on the roof on the third storey. Rabi was her companion in all of these activities. She was a good cook and enjoyed feeding people; so he had his reward without any delay. In return, Rabi read aloud to her from books and periodicals. She liked his style of reading.

Kadambari Devi and Rabindranath disagreed about the keeping of birds in cages. She liked to have them and he disliked it extremely. When he protested that she was doing wrong she would answer that he need not give himself the airs of a guru. Instead of quarrelling futilely about it Rabi set the birds free in secret.

Elder sisters-in-law in Bengal have the astonishing ability to provide the pleasures of companionship and at the same time fill with maternal tenderness, the place left vacant by an absent mother. Kadambari Devi had no children of her own. After the death of Sarada Devi she took charge of Rabindranath and looked after him. Their old playful, teasing relationship was carried forward into the new one.

With and without reason Kadambari Devi found fault with Rabi's looks. She refused to admit that he had a good singing voice or could write well. She used to say, perhaps to prevent him from growing conceited: "Yes, the poem is not half so bad. But you will never be able to write like Biharilal Chakravarty." Biharilal Chakravarty was a well-

known poet of the day and Kadambari Devi was one of his devoted admirers.

But Rabi was not discouraged, no matter how much she teased him. A wild and irresistible urge drove him to seek self-expression in poetry and song. One of his poems, *Banaphul* (The Wild Flower), appeared about this time in a magazine called *Jnanankur* (Sprouting Knowledge). This was the first of his poems to be published. Rabi was fifteen. His first prose writing, a critical essay, also appeared in this magazine.

In 1877, when Rabi was sixteen, he appeared on stage for the first time in the title role of Jyotirindranath's drama, *Alik Babu*. His resourcefulness and cleverness as an actor were revealed in this performance.

Bangadarshan, a periodical edited by Bankim Chandra Chatterji, made its appearance when Rabi was eleven years old. Many members of the Tagore family became subscribers. *Bangadarshan* was permitted in the inner apartments. Rabi had the opportunity to read it. Sometimes he read it secretly and sometimes he read a poem or a story aloud to Kadambari Devi.

Jyotirindranath decided to publish a journal of his own with the eldest brother Dwijendranath as editor. The name chosen was *Bharati*. It appeared in July 1877. Rabi was, from the start, a member of the editorial circle. He wrote a critical study of Michael Madhusudan Dutta's *Meghnad Badh* which was harsh and it was published in the first issue. Much later Rabindranath confessed that he was ashamed of his insolence as a youngman in writing this article and commented that the juice of a green mango is tart.

Among the music-loving friends of Jyotirindranath was one Akshay Chaudhuri. He was very friendly with Rabi. One day he told him the story of England's boy poet, Chatterton. Chatterton published a sheaf of poems in imitation of the classic English poets. He announced that the poems had been discovered among the papers left by a certain religious teacher named Rowley who lived during the Middle Ages. The poems created a sensation in English literacy circles. Many were unable to detect that the poems were the work of an unknown sixteen-year-old boy.

Rabi wanted to become a second Chatterton. He was very fond of Vidyapati's *Padavali*. He had studied them thoroughly without the aid

of any commentary. The difficult words of *Braja* dialect and even the rules of its grammar, as he ascertained them unassisted, were all entered in a small notebook. The family paper *Bharati*, provided him with the opportunity to carry out his plan.

On a cloudy day, lying on his stomach, Rabi composed some *padas* in imitation of Vidyapati. The first two lines ran:

*In the thickly flowering arbour
The sweet and gentle flute is playing....*

When these *padas* appeared in the pages of *Bharati* the author was introduced as an old master of the *padavali* style named Bhanu Sinha. The editor said they had been recovered from a frayed manuscript found in the library of the Adi Brahmo Samaj, and quite a sensation was caused in literacy circles by their publication.

Other writings of Rabindranath also appeared in *Bharati* about this time—well-considered essay on foreign and native customs, poems and stories, studies of civilisation and literatures. Rabi, roaming freely in the realms of knowledge and fancy, had acquired a considerable amount of learning.

ENGLAND

SATYENDRANATH, the second brother, came to Calcutta from Ahmedabad when *Bharati* was entering its second year. His wife and children were in England. He himself was due for a long furlough shortly. He was eager for his youngest brother to study in England and become a barrister. He asked the Maharshi for permission to take Rabi with him. The Maharshi granted permission gladly. It was decided that Rabi would accompany Satyedranath to Ahmedabad. Satyendranath held the post of a judge there at that time. He would polish Rabi's English and teach him foreign manners before taking him to England.

The judge's residence at Ahmedabad had been a palace in the time of the Moghuls. A shadowy picture of a vanished time haunted Rabi. It was here, in this Shahibag palace, that the first inklings of the story *Hungry Stones* came to him. It was again here that on a night flooded with moonlight, he composed the songs:

*See how the still night
Is submerged in the moonlight.....*

This song is worth noting because in it, for the first time, Rabi set words of his own making to a tune of his own composition.

Bombay followed. On the 20th of September, 1878 he sailed for England, Rabi was seventeen years and four months old.

After reaching England Rabi stayed at Brighton with his sister-in-law, Jnandanandini Devi. He was put in a public school there. His classmates showed their affection for their new Indian friend in various ways. Often they would slip an apple or an orange into his pocket and run away.

He was taken to London not long after and admitted to the University. Rabi lodged with an English family—the Scotts—as other Indian students did. The day Rabi brought his things he was told that the two little girls of the family had, for fear of the foreigner, taken refuge with a relative. Their mother went to put their fears at rest and



Young Rabi in London

bring them home. They discovered on their return that this young foreigner was not at all terrible. On the contrary, he was extremely likeable and handsome. These girls later became Rabi's very special friends.

Mrs. Scott looked after Rabi like her own son. After finishing the house-work, she participated eagerly in the studies of the children, their chatter and their music. Rabi was the centre of this small circle. His voice was good and he read poetry well. He read poetry, drama and passages from English history aloud to them every evening. Sometimes he read until midnight.

At the University, Rabi studied English literature under the famous Henry Morley. Literature came to life in his voice, and he not only read to his students he made them write exercises. On a specified day of the week every student had to hand in something of his own composition. They were not allowed to sign their work. Morley took their pieces home and went through them carefully. Then he discussed each piece in class, pointing out its good and bad points. An Indian classmate of Rabindranath wrote an essay decrying his countrymen and eulogising the British. Morley disliked the essay extremely and said false praise was as bad for the British as it was insulting to Indians. Rabi wrote an answer drawing attention to the improper behaviour of British officials in India. Rabi absented himself from class on the fateful day. He was afraid of what Morley might say. But a friend, Loken Palit, sought him out and slapped him on the back. Mr. Morley had spoken highly of his piece and even read it out to the whole class.

Rabi was in England for only a year and a half and he was able to study at the University for not more than three or four months. We can see from his letters how much of English life and literature he was able to absorb within that time. These letters, *Europe Prabasisir Patra*, were published in *Bharati*. The friendliness of the Scott family helped him greatly in acquiring this understanding of England. Rabi retained in England the habit he had formed in the Himalayas and took his bath every day in cold water even during the London winter. Mrs. Scott worried about it as she did not know how excellent his health was.

Satyendranath's furlough was over. The Maharshi wrote that Rabi should return to India with him. At the time of leaving Mrs. Scott took both of Rabi's hands into her own and said: "If you came only to leave after such a short stay, why did you come at all, Rabi?"

The tide of Rabi's poetry writing and music making had not slackened in the least while he was abroad. He sent his writings to *Bharati* regularly. Quite a few classics of church music and a number of Irish melodies and popular airs of the drawing-room or music-hall variety were added to his repertoire. His high tenor voice had made him a popular singer among his friends and in the Scott household. When he came back to India and sang these new songs for his family, everybody said: "What is the matter with Rabi's voice? How funny and foreign it sounds!"

At that time Jyotirindranath was absorbed in an attempt to make a new kind of music by transposing classical melodies to the piano. Rabi's first musical drama grew out of this combined melody, Indian and European. It was *Valmiki Pratibha* (The Genius of Valmiki). An entirely new mode of expression was successfully created in this play through the skillful blending of these melodies.

A literary society called the *Vidvatjana Samagam* met regularly at the Tagore residence. *Valmiki Pratibha* was staged for it in February, 1881. In the audience was Bankim Chandra Chatterji, Bengal's leading literary figure of the time. The excellence of the acting was sensational. Rabi himself took the role of Valmiki. Pratibha, the eldest daughter of Hemendranath, played the part of Saraswati. Towards the end of the play Saraswati places her veena in the hands of Valmiki and says-

*Your name will remain, eternal as the snows,
The stream of your poetry will flow there
Where Jahnavi's waters pour.
A seat shall be made for you
At the foot of my lotus throne.
New and ever newer songs
Will hold you enthralled.
Take my vina. I present it to you.
Play the songs you will sing
Upon this, my instrument.*

It was like a prophecy.

Some two months after this performance Rabi was invited to give a lecture on *Music and Feeling* at the Bethune Society. It was his first public lecture. He illustrated his explanation of the intimate relationship between music and feeling by singing as he went along. The Chairman, Rev. Krishna Mohon Banerjee praised the young poet highly. The lecture



Rabindranath in the role of Valmiki

was a preface to the blending of music and mood, we find later in Rabindranath's own songs.

The day following the lecture, Rabi left for England a second time. Rabi was twenty years old. This time he was accompanied by his nephew, Satya Prasad. Everybody in the family wanted them both to study for the bar and become barristers. On the way Satya Prasad felt physically and emotionally very ill. The pair of them, uncle and nephew, came home from Madras. The Maharshi was at Mussoorie then. When Rabi went up to Mussoorie to apologise, he did not scold his son, his only comment was: "What God does is for the best."

Rabi went to Chandernagar from Mussoorie. Jyotirindra was there with his wife. They were living in a garden house belonging to one Mr. Moran. It was the rainy season and the Ganga was in flood. Rabi's song-making flowed as swiftly as the river. He composed his *Sandhya Sangeet* (Evening Songs) in Mr. Moran's garden.

Into these poems he poured all the yearning and passion of his young heart. *Sandhya Sangeet* could only have been written by a genuine poet and those who really understood literature were quick to recognise the fact. Some time after these poems appeared in book form, Rabi was invited to attend a wedding at Romesh Chandra Dutt's house. Bankim Chandra Chatterji was getting out of his carriage when he arrived. The host came forward to welcome Bankim Chandra with a garland, but Bankim took the garland and put it around Rabi's neck.

"This garland belongs to him," he said, "Romesh, haven't you read his *Sandhya Sangeet*?" During his stay at Chandernagar, Rabindranath also began writing his novel, *Bou Thiakuranir Hat* (The Young bride's Market).

A RADIANT VISION

IN 1882 Rabindranath was twenty-one years old. Up to that time he had been more or less absorbed in himself and his own development. Suddenly a profound experience opened the door of the outer world to him. He was staying with Jyotirindranath in a house on Sudder Street. They had both left Chandernagar. Rabindranath describes this amazing experience in his memoirs. *Jivansmriti*:

“The end of Sudder Street and the trees in the compound of the Free School opposite it could be seen from our Sudder Street house. One morning I happened to be standing on the verandah looking that way. The sun was just rising through the leafy tops of those trees. As I continued to gaze, all of a sudden a covering seemed to fall away from my eyes, and I found the world bathed in a wonderful radiance, with waves of beauty and joy swelling up on every side. This radiance pierced in a moment through the folds of sadness and despondency which had accumulated over my heart and flooded it with this universal light.”

“As I stood on the balcony, the gait, the figure and the features of each one of the passers-by, whoever he might be, seemed to me all so extraordinarily wonderful as they flowed past—waves on the universe. From infancy I had seen only with my eyes, I now began to see with the whole of my consciousness.... friend laughs with friend, the mother fondles her child, a cow sidles up to another and licks its body, and the immeasurability behind these comes direct to my mind with a shock which almost savours of pain.”

That very day the poem *Nirjharer Swapna Bhanga*, “(The Awakening of the Waterfall)”, gushed forth like a veritable cascade. The poem came to an end but the curtain did not fall upon this joyous vision of the Universe. This cosmic sense of joyousness lasted four days. The first two lines of another poem he wrote about this time are:

*Today my heart opened and the world
Entered in, embracing me.*

This feeling of kinship with the created world influenced him profoundly throughout his long life. And for that reason the world of creation acknowledged him as its very own poet.

Rabindranath left Calcutta for Darjeeling where *deodar* pines crown the mountains. And from there he went South, to the casuarina-enriched harbour of Karwar in Karnataka. The intimation of universal kinship which had come to him on Sudder Street in populous Calcutta appeared to be lost.

While in Karwar, the poet wrote a symbolic play to give an artistic form to the incomparable realisation that had come to him. The name of the play was *Prakritir Pratisodh* (Nature's Revenge). The hero is a sanyasi who breaks all his ties with the world in an attempt to subdue and conquer nature, assuming that the infinite is something extraneous to all things. At last a young girl wins his affection and thus sets him free from the bonage of his errors. She restores him to the human world. In forswearing the world and then accepting it once more, the hero undergoes great suffering. In discovering the infinite in the finite and liberation in the ties of love, he defeats the heartless doctrine of *Maya* the illusion.

In 1833, towards the end of the year, Rabindranath married Mrinalini Devi.

Joy and grief, union and separation, life and death, come to us hand in hand. Death broke in upon the poet's life quite suddenly. Undiluted joy is not for us. In the abyss into which he was plunged by his grief the poet realised this. Within six months of his marriage Kadambari Devi committed suicide. She who had been his companion from childhood, within the embrace of whose motherly affection he had been sheltered and cared for after the loss of his mother, she who was the source of his inspiration in his music and his poetry, was no more. His grief at her untimely passing was unendurable. The light went out of the world. But life flows on, restoring the loss caused by death and separation by the addition of new life, like a river. Rabindranath at last pulled himself together and brought himself out of his distracted condition. Death and sorrow lost their power to unbalance him.

Rabindranath was not broken. On the contrary his life deepened and enlarged.

The Maharshi gave him charge of the administration of the *Adi*

Brahmo Samaj. Many devotional songs were composed during this period. Once he had smiled at Rabi's reference to the sorrows of the world in the hymn he composed as a child. But now these songs gave the Maharshi the greatest satisfaction, bringing comfort and contentment.

The Maharshi was living at Chinsurah. Rabindranath was summoned to his side. He had composed some new songs for the *Magh Utsava*. The Maharshi made him sit in front of him and sing them one by one. In one the poet said:

*The eye cannot behold Thee
For Thou dwellest within the eye.*

The Maharshi listened to this song with his head bowed and his hands folded in his lap. When it was finished, he said: "If the king of the country had known its language and could appreciate its literature, he would doubtless have rewarded the poet. Since that is not so, I suppose I must do it." And with that he placed a cheque for five hundred ruppes in Rabindranath's hand.

It was about this time, 1884, that Neo-Hinduism appeared in Bengal. Many busied themselves trying to prove the superiority of everything in the Hindu religion. Some even went so far as to give a pseudo-scientific explanation of omens like sneezing and the movements of lizards. It was claimed that pigtails conduct electricity. To Rabindranath all this seemed strange and farcical. He wrote ironical verses, plays and essays ridiculing the falsity of this interpretation of Hinduism. He did not even hesitate to criticise Bankim Chandra Chatterji in this respect though he cherished the greatest respect for him.

REFORMER AND PATRIOT

RABINDRANATH now began to participate in social and political affairs, setting his feet very firmly on the soil of his country. He put an end to his airy flights on the wings of his imagination.

The second session of the Indian National Congress took place in Calcutta in 1886. Standing on the Congress grounds Rabindranath sang a song of his own composition:

*At the call of our common mother
We gather here together.
None is a stranger in his own home.
Can brothers live without each other?
Wherever we may dwell
Our lives are linked together.
The call of our hearts brings us here.
Who has not known this longing?*

Written in simple Bengali of daily use and set to a melody of Bengal's very own *Baul* mode, this song preceeded the work Rabindranath was to do in the not very distant future. Before we speak of the Rabindranath of Shelaidah, his country seat on the bank of the Padma, something more must be said about his personal life and literary activities at this time.

Rabindranath wrote continuously from the time of his marriage until 1890. His stories, poems, dramas, essays and critical studies appeared in *Bharati* and various other periodicals. Among these periodicals were *Balak* (Boy) edited by Jnanadanandini Devi, *Prachar* which was edited by Bankim Chandra, *Sanjivani* and *Tattavabodhini*. Two stories, *Mukut* (Crown) and *Rajarishi* (The Royal Sage) were published in *Balak*.

The best of his writings at this time was *Manasi*. Most of the poems in this book were written at Ghazipur.

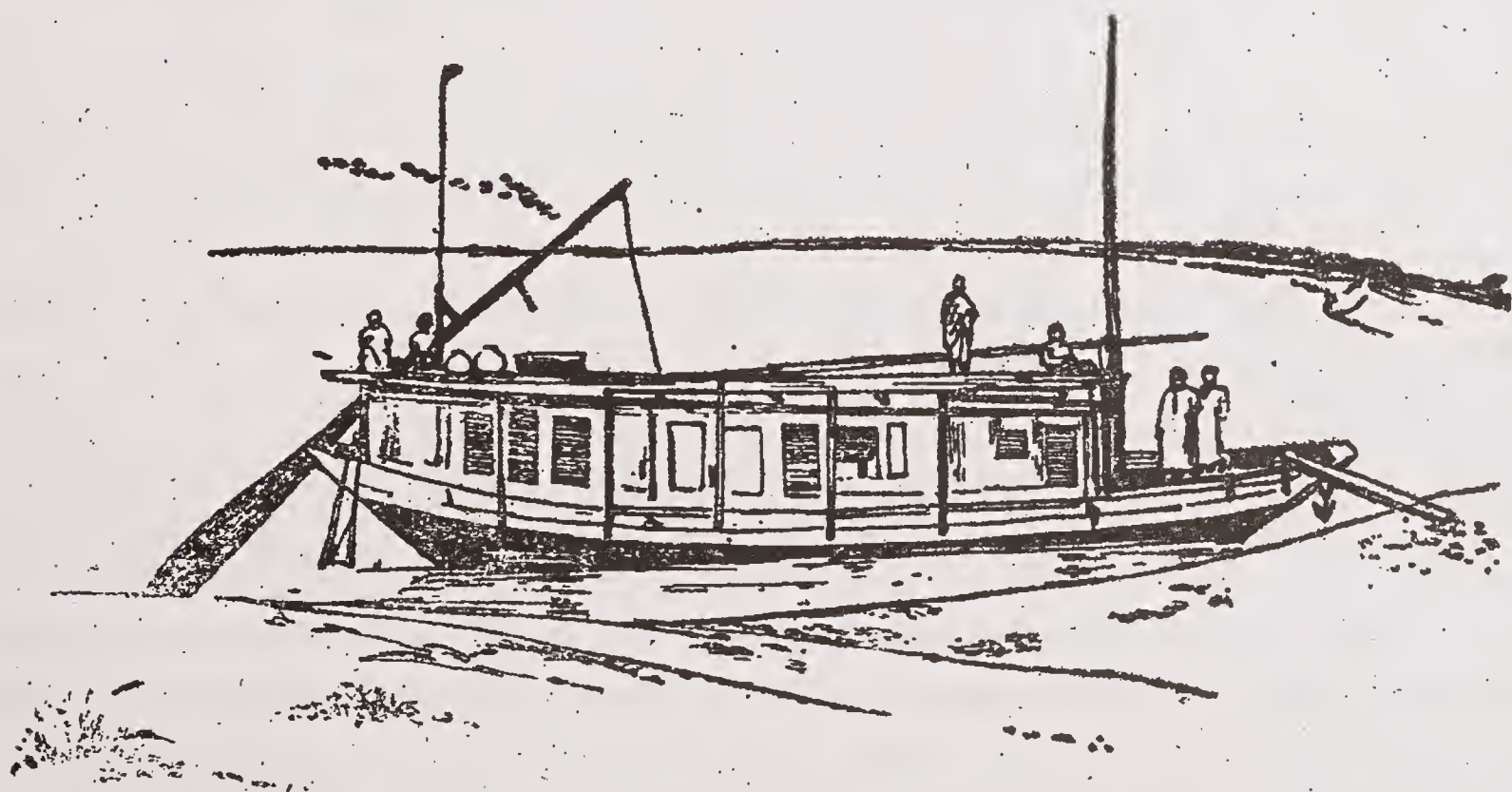
Rabindranath paid a brief visit to Santiniketan in 1890. The

Maharshi had drawn up a trust deed two years earlier according to which the Santiniketan property was dedicated to the use of the public. A sum of money was set aside to meet the annual expenses. The boy who dreamt of King Prithvi now addressed the poet of *Meghadutam* in the following terms:

Poet! In a long forgotten year
On the first day of auspicious Asadh
You composed "The Cloud Messenger".

He wrote several plays during these years. *Mayar Khela* (The Play of Illusion), a musical play, was written at the request of the *Sakhi Samiti*, a women's organisation. The variety in mood and music displayed in this play for the first time can be said to be truly characteristic of Rabindranath. The other plays were *Raja o Rani* and *Visarjan* (The Sacrifice). Both of them were staged as soon as they were written. The playwright himself appeared in the roles of Vikram in *Raja o Rani* and Raghupati in *Visarjan*. His acting received the highest praise.

After a lapse of many years, in 1890, Satyedranath again took leave to visit England. Rabindranath accompanied him. An entertaining description of this journey is given in *Europe Jatrir Diary*. He was there only for three months. He felt homesick for his children. Bela, his eldest daughter, was four years old. She was a delightful chatterbox like mini in the story *Kabuliwallah*. Rathindranath, his elder son, was two.



The houseboat "Padma"

When, towards the end of 1890, Rabindranath took upon himself the management of the landed estates of the family after his return to India, he went to live at Shelaidah. He had to go alone. The children were very young and Mrinalini Devi therefore stayed on at the Jorasanko residence. His literary activities made it necessary for the poet to visit Calcutta frequently. The wild and turbulent Padma on one side and the obscure Gorai on the other. Between the two rivers lay homesteads, plantations and trees. It was a beautiful and tranquil environment. Rabindranath did not spend much of his time in the manor. His houseboat, named *Padma*, was moored at the shore. After office he would go down to it. This boat on the river was his home when he was alone. The landed estate of the Tagores was extensive and scattered. He visited the various parts of it by boat—Shajadpur, Patisar, Kaligram. But most of the time he was at Shelaidah.

He had visited Shelaidah once as a boy in the company of Jyotirindranath. That was his first acquaintance with the part of Bengal which is mothered by rivers. He had already seen the Himalayas. But the visit this time was different. His eyes had been opened by the profound experience he had had on Sudder Street; his heart had been deepened by grief, and, on becoming a father, he had learned to accept the responsibility of parenthood. His time had passed pleasantly enough. He had occupied himself with music, literature and drama. Most of his life had been spent in the city of Calcutta. But a new, much more expansive phase began when he took upon himself the responsibility of looking after the family estates and came to live in this village for that purpose. Little by little he became acquainted with the countryside, with village life, with the simple-hearted villagers and cultivators. The Hindu Mela, the Sanjivani Sabha and similiar organisations had been the toys of his youth. His patriotism had been fervid. Now, for the first time, he was face to face with the real life of his country. He beheld the mother earth, the part of the planet which is our very own, the gold of the fields of mustard growing beside the tenderly flowing rivers, the dwellings of men, replete with happiness and sorrow. Mother Bengal opened her lap to her children, village people, people who truly belong to the soil.

At Shajadpur a servant came to work late one morning. Rabindranath, the young landlord, was displeased and annoyed by the inconvenience to which he was put. Momin Miya presented himself, bowed with his usual greeting and said hoarsely, "My eight-year-old daughter left me last night. I have just come from her grave." And with

that he took up the dust cloth and set about his work just as on any other day.

In another incident, an old farmer came in and said: "One year my crop was poor and I went to your father at Chinsurah to request him to waive his dues. 'Give me a little to eat', he said, 'and I'll let the rest go'. The *amin* was angry with me for going to him. He involved me in a false law suit and had me sent to jail for three months. So I just bade good-bye to your estate and moved away. The other landlord had misappropriated some land belonging to you and was taking the produce of it. I reported this to the estate office here. The landlord took away both my land and my crop to punish me. May I not tell the truth to the man on whose land I have grown old?" The old Muslim wiped a tear from his eye.

Another occurrence comes to mind. Rabindranath was on his way to his estate, travelling by palanquin. An elderly farmer ran up from his field and stopped him. Untying a knot in his loin cloth he counted out a present of cash. Rabindranath did not wish to accept it. The old man insisted. His argument was plain and direct: "What will you eat if we do not give you something?"

His acquaintance with these simple people gradually deepened. He came to know them through his administrative work. They were so helpless, so without resources, so dependent. He recognised in them his own people, members of a single large family, spread all over the country. No good could come to India, he realised, until hope awakened in their hearts and voice was given to their needs. Can a country in which eighty out of a hundred people live in the villages progress if the villages lag behind? He also realised that until these people, so dependent, learned to stand on their own feet no one could save them, no king and no landlord, not even god himself. The villager always looked up to others hoping for alms of all kinds from the powerful, and always blamed everything that befell him on fate, bad luck, etc. He did not realise that the strength of the country, the strength of the nation, lay in him. When his home was destroyed by fire or famine wiped out whole hamlets, the villager beat his head with his fists and blamed his bad luck or stretched out his palm at the doors of the mighty.

Rabindranath began to experiment with ways of improving the life of the villagers. He called his tenants and said: "No one can help you but you yourselves. Work that you cannot accomplish singly, work that

is of benefit to others, should be done together. When ten men work together they need not mind whether they fail or succeed.”

It is easy to give advice from outside. Rabindranath gradually realised how difficult it is to bring about inward change. Merely to love one's country and one's countrymen is not enough to enable one to work for the country. Knowledge and sustained effort is required in order to serve. Rabindranath's greatest achievement as a landowner was that he won the hearts of his tenants. This love was so strong that even in his old age, when he was ill, in 1937, he visited Patisar at their request. When he took his last farewell at Atrai station a large crowd assembled. Many people in the crowd had beards as white as his own. As they wiped their eyes these venerable villagers said “We have never seen the prophet but we have seen our Babu Moshai.”

Rabindranath wrote with unabated energy during his stay in his country estates. At least three periodicals, *Hitabadi*, *Sadhana* and *Bharati* published his works every month—poetry, essays, plays and criticism. He also began to write the astonishing series of stories published in *Galpa Guchchha*. These stories written among the sand dunes of the Padma, established the true short story in Bengali literature. Most of them have village settings and deal with village people.

Postmaster was one of the first stories he wrote. This postmaster, the post-master at Shajadpur, is mentioned in one of the letters he wrote regularly to his niece, Indira Devi. The letters have been collected and published as *Chhinna Patra*.

Rabindranath developed a keen interest in folk literature and folk music while he was living in the country. He was the first to draw the attention of cultivated circles to them. The impact of folk melody is obvious in many of his songs. He himself collected many folk songs composed by a certain Lalan Fakir who was a famous *baul*. A mail-runner named Gagan often sang a song which began:

*Where shall I find him,
The man of my heart?*

Rabindranath used the melody for a song of his own. The first line of this song is:

I love thee, Bengal, land of gold—

Eminent people and the leaders of the country were then in the habit of giving long orations in English at the annual meetings of the Congress. They hoped, by such means, to obtain concessions from the British rulers. Every year resolutions were passed for and accepting alms in one form or another from the foreign government.

Most of the leaders were barristers and practising lawyers. Of those who made their living by the law the most prosperous at that time was Taranknath Palit. He was a friend of Satyendranath. Loken, Rabindranath's classmate in London, was his son. All the delegates in the second session in the Indian National Congress were invited to his Ballygunge residence, a vast mansion, at its conclusion. He wanted Rabi to entertain the guests by his singing after dinner and therefore invited him also.

At the appointed hour in the evening the guests arrived. But Rabindranath appeared in a strange costume. Everyone else came dressed for dinner in the English fashion. The poet alone was wearing the homely Bengali dhoti and scarf. When he was asked to sing, he choose a song he had composed that day. Whether the guests were pleased or not is not known. The song opened thus:

*Ask me not to sing, ask me not, Is this a matter for laughter,
A festival of pleasure-seeker, A lying masquerade?
It is a tale of shame, The hope of the impoverished,
The hot breath of their sights, Their tears.*

It is true that many among those in whom a sense of Indian nationality first awakened were imitators of the British, Anglophiles. To read English, to speak English, to write English and most particularly, to orate in English was a matter of pride and credit. Most of them affected English manners and modes of dress, imitating them even in their custom of dining. They thought that they would become the equals of the British by doing these things.

But Rabindranath, in his efforts to serve his country, laid much stress on the importance of the language of the country. He knew that it is their mother tongue, Bengali, that is the bond between all Bengalis, Hindus and Muslims alike. The taking over of the administration is not the chief meaning of independence. A country which we do not build with the labour of our bodies, with the feelings of our hearts, will never be our own, it cannot belong to us. The freedom of a country lies in the liberty of the people of that country to express themselves without any

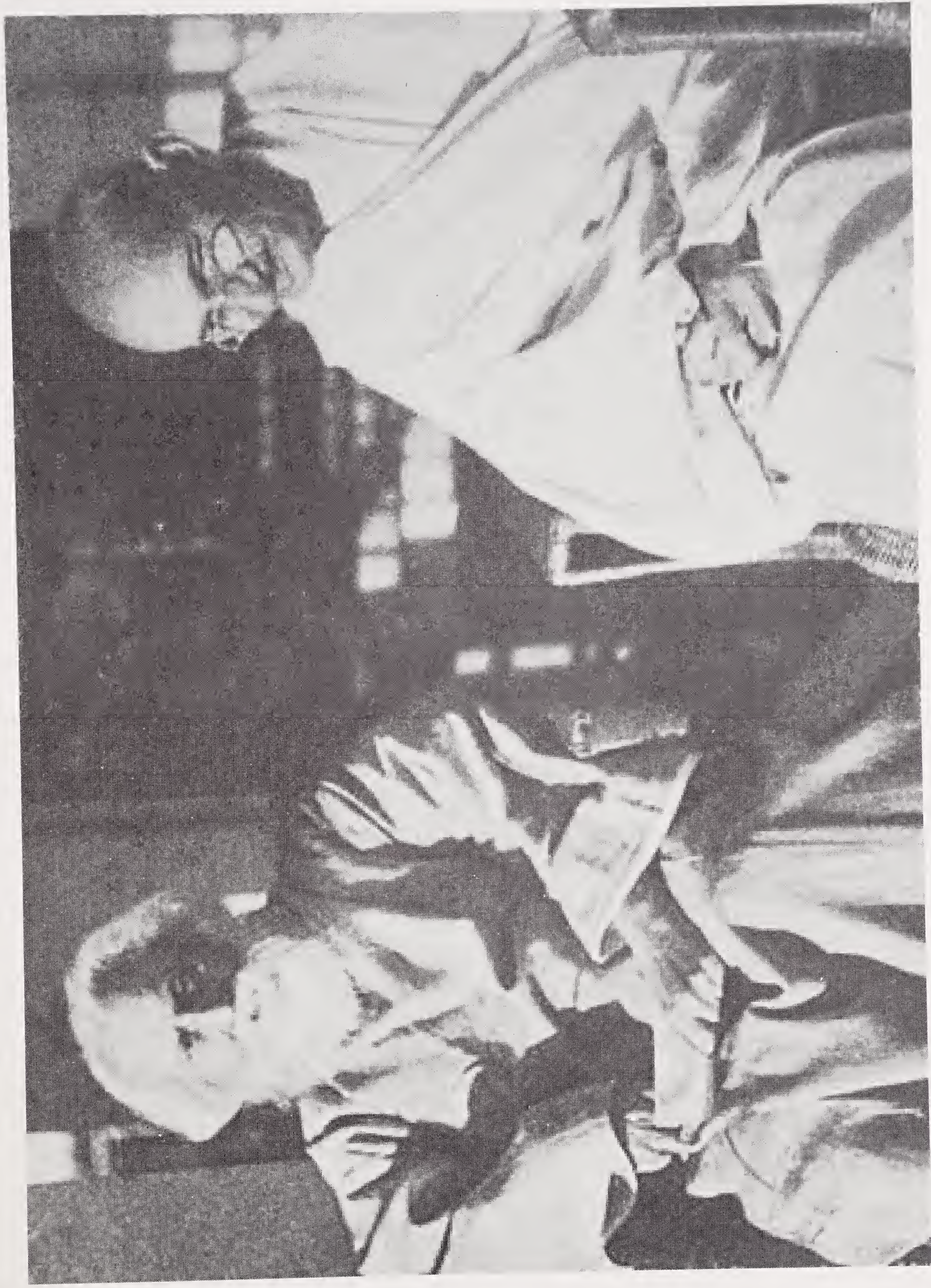
hindrance. Rabindranath reiterated again and again that Bengali consciousness can express itself freely only through the Bengali language.

In an essay entitled *Sikshar Her Pher* (Tortuosities of Education) which he wrote in 1892, Rabindranath declared that, just as a child who is nourished by his mother's milk grows most healthy and strong, the mind and the heart grow strongest when taught through the mother-tongue. He proposed that Bengali be made the medium of instruction in Bengal.

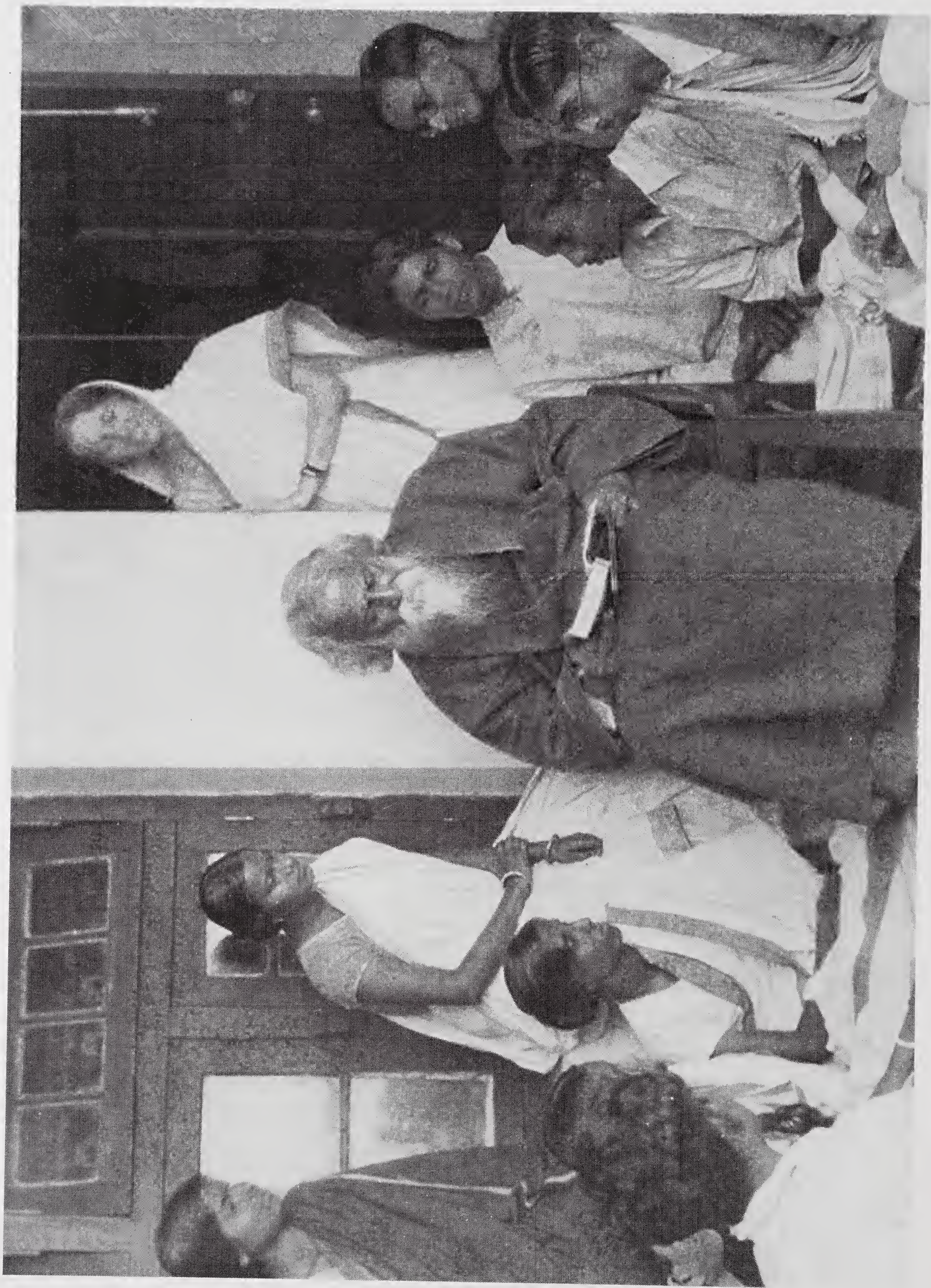
In 1897 a Provincial Conference was held at Natore. Rabindranath suggested that the proceedings be conducted in Bengali so that all could understand. Abanindranath describes the incident in his book *Gharoa* (Family Affairs).



Baul—The folk musicians



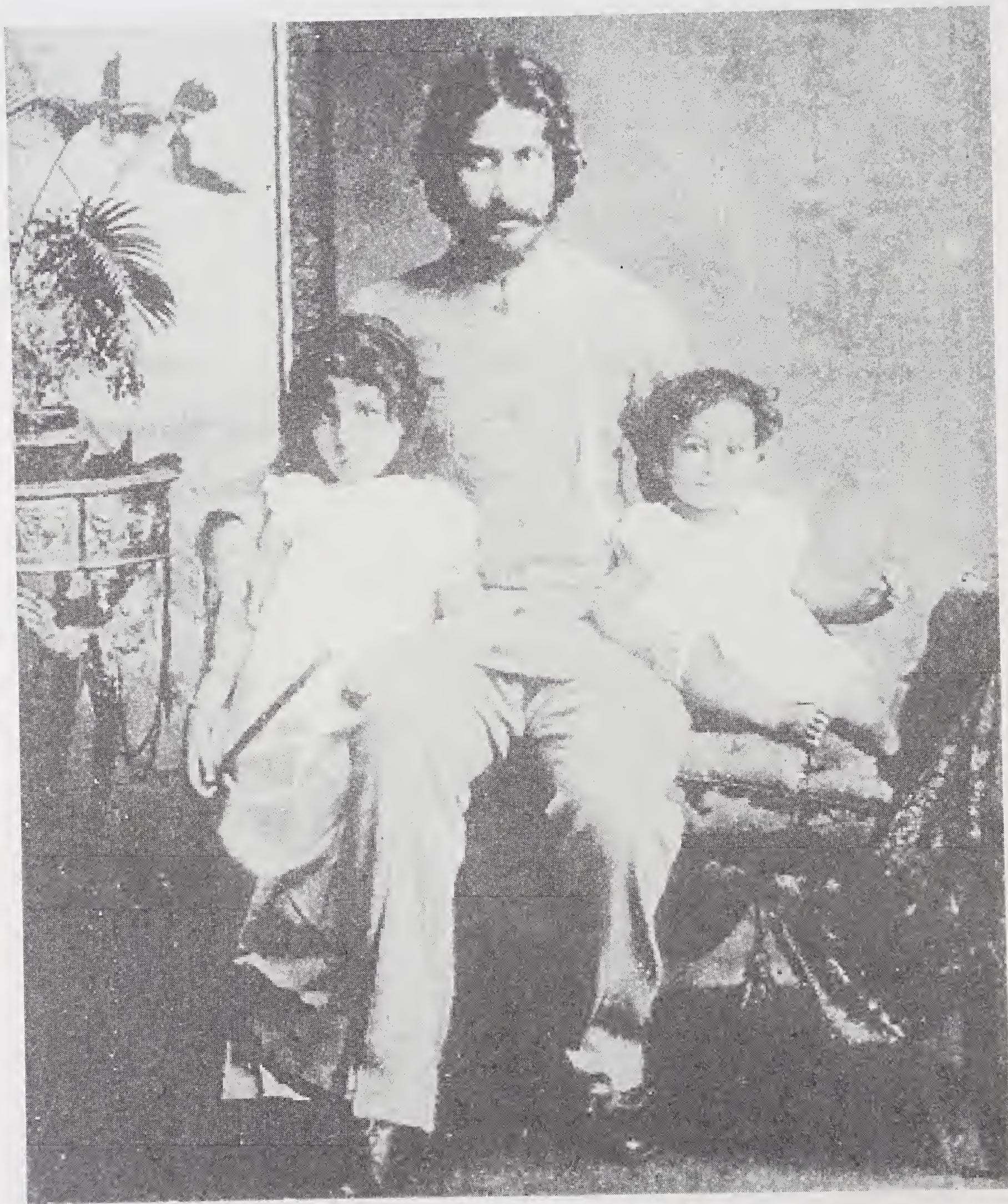
Tagore with Mahatma Gandhi



Tagore reading from a book with his admirers around



Tagore with his wife Mrinalini Devi



Rabindranath Tagore with daughter Madhurilata and son Rathindranath

“We boys were all for Uncle Rabi. Yes, we said, this ought to be done, by all means. A conflict arose with the leaders. They refused absolutely to nod their heads. The leaders said that the practice followed by the Congress of doing everything in English should also be followed by the Provincial Conference. We entered the pandal. Whenever somebody stood up to speak we all shouted together, Bengali ! Bengali !”

The leaders did not accept Rabindranath's suggestion at the time. Two years later, when the Conference met at Dacca, Rabindranath created a sensation when he summed up the English speech of the chairman, Rev. Kali Charan Banerjee, in brilliant and fluent Bengali. The custom of conducting the proceedings of public conferences in Bengali spread from that time on.

Rabindranath did not rest by taking up the flag of his mother tongue. He also tried to promote and patronise indigenous industries. He opened Swadeshi Bhandar in Calcutta in order to make people aware of the arts and crafts of their own country. At Kushtia, he established a large business of his own. In his writings during this period (1892-1900) we find that he was thinking very deeply about the various problems of the country, the quarrel between Hindus and Muslims, the indifference of the land owners to the welfare of their tenants and the common people, the trouble caused by British rule. He wrote and spoke about these and other things, starting public agitations and participating in them.

While he continued to collect folk songs and folk poetry, he wrote poems narrating the glorious incidents in the history of India to rouse in his countrymen an awareness of the greatness of their heritage. Later he published these in a book called *Katha*. In search of the history that is the source of all our history he went back to the ancient forest hermitages, to the age of the Upanishads *Naivedya* was written. The school at Santiniketan was founded. This school was the outward manifestation of *Naivedya*. All this took place towards the end of the period we are dealing with.

Let us return for the present to the basic ideas behind Rabindranath's conception of Indianness. From the very first we find that, although Rabindranath did participate to some extent in the transient movements of the day, he was chiefly concerned with the root problems of the country. Again and again he pointed out that Indian tradition is characterised by an emphasis on society rather than on the state, particularly in the lives of the common people. Village society, he said, is

the core of the country and the nation. If the work on the fields can be well done, if the neglected arts of the village can be revived, if the villagers can work together and, relying on their own strength, keep step with the times and march forward, why should the country remain backward ? In his essay *Swadeshi Samaj* he propounded a plan of this kind in 1904.

The next year, 1905, saw the start of the movement to partition Bengal. The Viceroy, Lord Curzon, decided that of the two new provinces he proposed to form, the one comprising Bihar, Orissa and Western Bengal would have its capital at Calcutta and be administered by a Governor. The argument was that places as far away as Noakhali and Chittagong could not be given proper attention from Calcutta. This arrangement might have facilitated administration but the motherland of Bengali would have been split into two and the seed of separation sown between Hindus and Muslims. The British found that the Bengalis were an intelligent people, concerned about the welfare of their country. They did not mince any words with regard to their foreign rulers. The only way to break the spirit of the Bengalis was to split them into two parts. Disunited, they would be weakened and their English rulers would feel more secure. When the proposal to partition Bengal was made the entire country protested, saying: "Bengal is our country, Bengali our mother-tongue. We shall not allow foreigners to separate us and allot us different places to live in."

Rabindranath left the work of his school at Santiniketan and came to Calcutta. As the national poet it was his duty to provide the movement with inspiration. In order to unite the Bengalis more closely he celebrated the *Rakhi Bandhan* in a novel way. And his patriotic songs, composed rapidly one after the other, swept the country.

On the morning of the *Rakhi Bandhan* day a procession was taken out on the streets of Calcutta with Rabindranath at its head. Crowds lined the streets from roofs to pavements. The women blew conch shells and scattered handfuls of popped rice. The procession advanced, singing:

Blessed be Bengal, Oh Lord! Blessed its soil, blessed its waters!

The people tied *rakhis* round one another's wrists. Nobody was overlooked, rich or poor, Hindu or Muslim. In the afternoon there was a huge meeting at Bagh Bazar. The procession moved in from Garpar, singing:

Canst thou break bond of fate? Art thou so strong?

So proud thou art to think thy hands, Can make or break us!

A large tin trunk was put on the dais in the pandal. In large white letters were written on it the words *Matri Bhandar*. Contributions to the extent of fifty thousand rupees poured in this national fund in response to Rabindranath's appeal.

The light that shows us the way can, as fire, be destructive. Rabindranath had thought that the young men of the country at least would come forward and enthusiastically undertake the work of building it from inside. His hope was not realised. He saw the young men of Bengal turning to terrorism in a fury of self-immolation. Even in those days of wild excitement Rabindranath kept on repeating that the welfare of the country lay in the welfare of the villages. He was misunderstood.

The village must stand on its own feet, he said. Friendship must be established and maintained between Hindus and Muslims in the name of their common country, he said. There was more to do than just to fight the hated foreign ruler. Unless co-operation in labour was undertaken, unless internal conflicts and differences resolved, he said, non-cooperation was not possible. In 1908 the Provincial Conference met at Pabna and Rabindranath was elected its President. Repeating what he had said in his essay *Swadeshi Samaj* he tried once more to draw the attention of his countrymen to the villages. For the first time the presidential address was in Bengali. But where were the people prepared to hear him in the name of the motherland? He was therefore obliged to make experiments of his own, trying to build the kind of society he envisioned at Kaligram, near Patisar, on his own estate.

And then a bomb was thrown at Muzaffarpur. In the country-wide turmoil which followed, Rabindranath's words were forgotten. Where were the people who could understand and appreciate the ideal of peaceful resistance he had portrayed in the character of Dhananjoy Vairagi in the play *Prayaschitta* (Atonement) written in 1909? Rabindranath told his countrymen and their rulers the same things Dhananjoy told the villagers: "The food that sustains life is the food that is offered to the god, the god of life. When there is a surplus in my storehouse I give it to the king. But I cannot pay the taxes of the king by starving the god." The country was not prepared. The peaceful non-cooperation movement was not to come until twelve years later by the circuitous route of politics.

SANTINIKETAN

RABINDRANATH's patriotic efforts were defeated by the transient excitement of the times. He was now convinced that the only way to prepare the minds of his countrymen was through education. Only by education could they be brought to accept the truth.

Education and its problems were considered by Rabindranath to be the major task before the country. His first essay on education, *Sikshar Her Pher*, was published in 1892. The main argument in this essay was that if the country is to be truly educated, it must be taught through the language of the country. He himself had been taught through the medium of his mother tongue when he was young. He knew from his own experience how difficult it is for Bengali boys to learn anything through the obstacle of an alien language with which they are not intimately acquainted.

A syllabus routine must be placed in a proper natural and social setting and drawn up with that setting in mind, just as learning must be made easier by instruction through the mother tongue. Rabindranath did not send his own children to a Calcutta school. He was never able to forget his jail-like experience at the Normal School and the Oriental Seminary.

In 1898 Mrinalini Devi left Calcutta and joined her husband at Shelaidah, taking with her the five children, Bela, Rathi, Rani, Mira and Sami. Bela was twelve years old, Sami two. Rabindranath turned a room in the manor house into a school for them. He decided to do part of the teaching himself and chose Bengali. One of the officers of his estate, Jagandananda Ray, was selected to teach science and arithmetic when he found time. Sivadhan Vidyarnava taught them Sanskrit and an Englishman by the name of William Lawrence taught them English.

Rabindranath was writing the poems of *Katha o Kahini* at the time. Bela and Rathi began their study of Bengali with this book. All the usual books for children, so unreadable, were carefully eliminated. The poet knew that if a child is taught childishly he does not grow into

manhood. Children are capable of imbibing a great deal of knowledge if it is presented to them with due respect and explained well. Some of it, a residue, remains with the child, stored in the sub-conscious mind. When lessons are memorised automatically, without understanding, that does not happen.

The children read stories from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata as well as from *Katha o Kahini*. In order that they might savour the flavour of the original Sanskrit, Rabindranath asked his wife to learn it and read Valmiki's Ramayana out to them, translating it into Bengali as she went. His nephew Suren, used to visit Kushtia frequently in order to look after their Swadeshi business. Rabindranath asked him to translate the Mahabharata into Bengali, simple enough to be suitable for children. Later this translation was cut down and simplified further to make the book, *Kuru Pandava*.

Rabindranath's talented friends often came to visit him at Shelaidah. The historian Akshay Kumar Maitreya, the scientist Jagadish Chandra Bose, the poet and dramatist Dwijendralal Roy, Jagadindranath Ray, the Maharajah of Natore, the civilian Loken Palit were among them. The children learned a lot with their help.

Late in the autumn the family took to the houseboat and spent some time on the sandbanks of the river Padma. Mile after mile of sand sparkled, in some places lying in waves like sea. As the children roamed about the dunes, sometimes an unexpected turning would reveal a low slope and a cluster of curly-headed casuarina pines at the base of which lay a stretch of shallow water. On the water nestled wild ducks in thousands. In the bush and jungle lived wild pigs. At night jackals howled. Great river tortoises were to be seen on both sides of the sandbanks.

Jagadish Chandra came out on nearly every holiday. The children were beside themselves with joy when he came. His laughter was as open and happy as the sandbank itself. He was wonderful at making friends with children, telling them stories of their own and other countries. The stories he told them of science were infinitely exciting. He would run about with the children like he was one himself. Sometimes they looked for tortoise eggs, sometimes they dug themselves into the sand and had a sun bath. It was great fun. They lay down in holes with a wet towel wrapped around their heads. The wet sand gleamed in the sun. It seemed to them that they were being boiled.

When they felt good and hot they plunged into the river. The water was so cold that their bones shook.

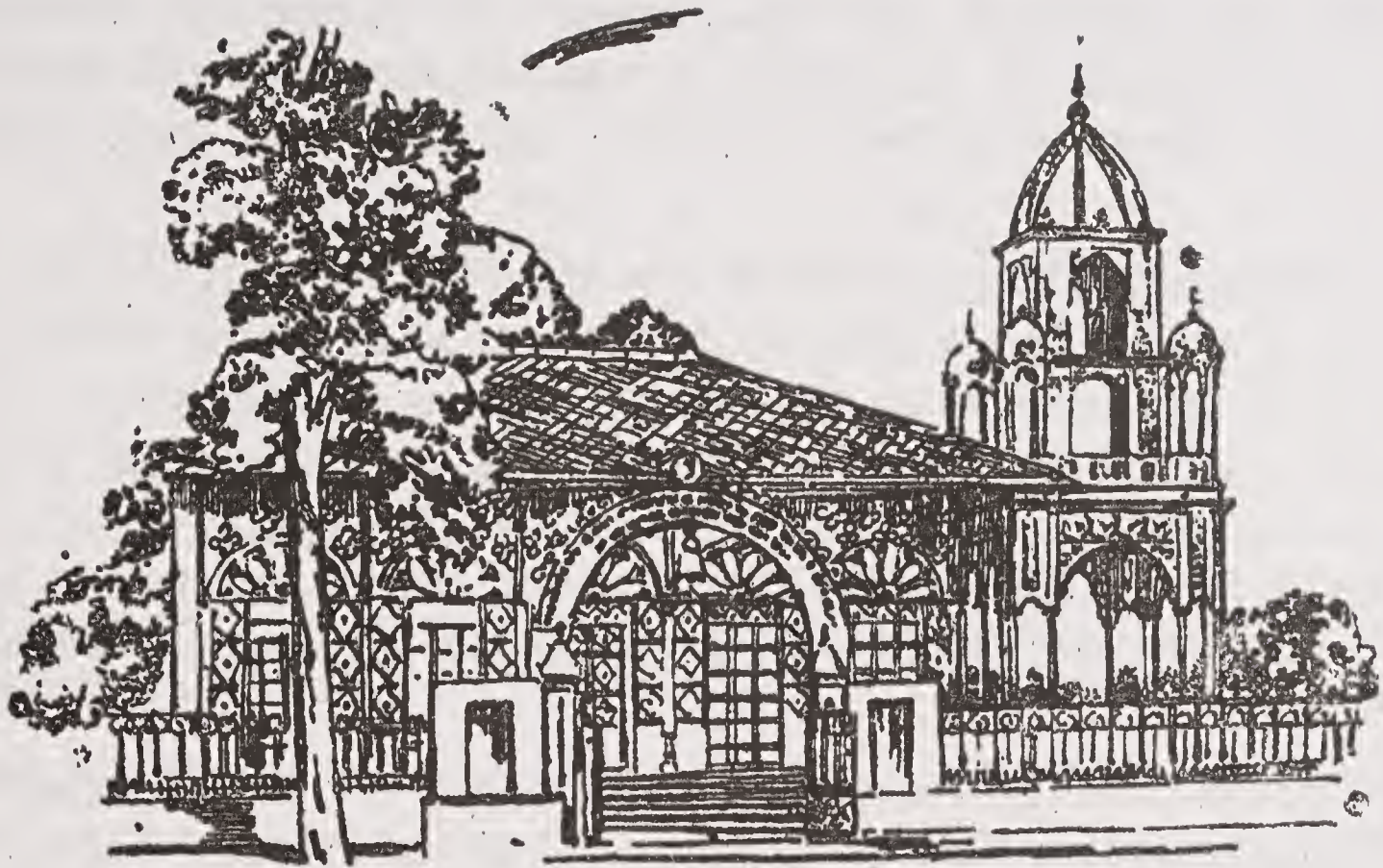
Thousands and thousands of wild ducks lived in the marshes. One morning they were startled by the sound of a gun. A flight of ducks wailed over the roof of the houseboat. Rabindranath was sitting in a deck chair, watching the sunrise. At the sound of the gun he began to tremble and his eyes blazed. A boatman, Tapsi Majhi, was immediately dispatched in a small boat to bring in the hunters.

Tapsi Majhi's prisoner turned out to be none other than the new police officer in charge of the local thana. It being a holiday, he had come duck shooting by boat. Three or four ducks lay in the bottom of the boat as silent witnesses of his degradation. The police officer came and stood before the landowner with folded hands. Rabindranath frowned slightly, tightened his lips, turned his face away and went into the cabin. The poor officer had not known that the shooting of birds was forbidden on the Tagore estates.

Rabindranath at this time (1898-1901), was attending to twenty different things single-handed. There was the work of his estates, his very varied literary activity, the school at home, the work of the Swadeshi business and the problems of the country.

And amidst all this untiring activity he was writing the *Naivedya* poems, one after another. His mood during these years is beautifully caught and expressed in them. Shame for his country, pain and hope, mingled with a profound religious awareness of which the Upanishad were the chief source. The outward expression of his hope he saw in the forest hermitage of his dreams.

An important part of this dream was the uninhibited freedom he had enjoyed in Santiniketan as a child. We have already mentioned the fact that the Maharshi dedicated the place of his meditation to public use in 1888. A temple was built about four years later. An *ashram* was growing up around the two-storeyed house. Every year, in commemoration of the Maharshi's initiation, a religious fair was held on the 7th of Poush. The Maharshi was now very old and unable to travel about as before. He made constant inquiries about Santiniketan from his Park Street residence and said to his intimates. 'I have established a temple at Santiniketan. The *Om* on the spire of the temple will be my symbol for all time—*ekam brahmastiti*."



The temple of Santiniketan

In 1900, at the time of the annual ceremonies, the Maharshi sent for Rabindranath and asked him to become the Acharya, accepting the religious leadership of the *ashram*. Rabindranath was to take charge of the prayer service held in the temple.

Naivedya was published the following year. It was dedicated to his father:

*I bow to Him
Who is the Father
In my Father.*

Many of the poems in *Naivedya* give poignant expression in lofty and sweet language to the deep spiritual truths of the Upanishads which the Maharshi sought to manifest in his own life:

*O God of gods, supreme.
In the shade of a forest retreat
A voice of thunder proclaimed
The infinite undying Oneness
Of a single divinity
In herbs, in trees, in water,
In fire, immanent
Through all the universe.
And that proclamation
Was the voice of India!*

When Rabindranath told his father that he wished to found a school at Santiniketan modelled on the ancient ideal of the forest *ashram* the Maharshi wholeheartedly approved and gave him his blessing.

On the 22nd of December (the 7th of Poush) in 1901, the boy who had been a truant in his childhood, founded a school of his own and named it the *Brahamcharya Ashram*. The school started with a handful of pupils. One of them was Rathindranath. Satyendranath presided over the inauguration. Rabindranath addressed the intitiates, who wore ceremonial clothes. "Today we dedicate our minds and hearts to the Truth. Long live the Truth!"—went the words of the school-song he composed.

We must take this opportunity to say a few words about the Santiniketan *Ashram*. The Maharshi was a devout Brahmo and a family man. We have already spoken of the crisis that developed in the affairs of the Tagore family after the death of his father. The Maharshi, by the skill and astuteness of his management, retrieved the fortunes of the family. He was nearly forty before everything was straightened out and put in order. He then felt a deep and impelling need to devote himself to thoughts of God withdrawing from wordly affairs. He made frequent journeys by land and by water to places which were suitable for meditation and prayer. The Himalayas offered the most congenial environment for this kind of life. Most of the time he was at Simla, Dalhousie and other such places. Month after month passed in tranquil meditation. His heart brimmed with the bliss of spiritual realisation. It did not seem right to him to keep his joy to himself and he sought to share it with others. He returned to Bengal and began to look for a place suitable for meditation.

The Maharshi had many admirers among the members of the Sinha family of Raipur. We have already mentioned Srikantha Sinha. The Sinhas lived a few miles from Bolpur. It was at the invitation of the Sinhas that the Maharshi first set foot on the uplands of Birbhum, probably in the year Rabindranath was born, 1861.

The land had apparently never been cultivated and the population was sparse. Empty uplands stretched barrenly away to the horizon. Waste land of this kind is called *Brahma Danga* by the local people. A single Chhatim tree made a patch of shade in the otherwise treeless and grassless plain. The Maharshi's palanquin stopped there to rest.

The coolness refreshed his mind and body. He felt a sense of great happiness. The plain stretched in front of him, shining in the sunlight. The sky above him was high and in the west the sun was setting in a blaze of colour. Profound peace slowly settled over the bosom of the earth. The heart of the Maharshi overflowed with thoughts of God. His whole being sang:

*He is the joy of my heart
The comfort of my spirit
The peace of my soul.*

He decided then and there, that this was the place for his Santiniketan.

He purchased about seven acres of land from the Sinhas and built a two storeyed house. The name of the house was Santiniketan, the 'Abode of Peace'. In order that relatives and friends could come and stay in it to meditate and discuss matters of the spirit, the Maharshi furnished the house comfortably and provided it with books. He had earth carried in from ponds at a distance and built a garden upon it. An orchard was planted. The Maharshi visited this quiet retreat frequently and passed his time here happily in the company of those who believed as he did. When his age and his health prevented him from leaving Calcutta he cherished Santiniketan in his thoughts. The temple was built for the worship of the Creator of the Universe, the Father, the One god without a second, and the cultivation of brotherhood among all men. Then he drew up a deed of trust and donated the *ashram* to the public. In this trust deed he stated that a school and a library might be established at Santiniketan for the advancement of religion. In founding his Brahmacharya *Ashram*, Rabindranath therefore carried out his father's wishes.

It is difficult now to picture Santiniketan as it was when the Maharshi granted permission to Rabindranath to start a school there.

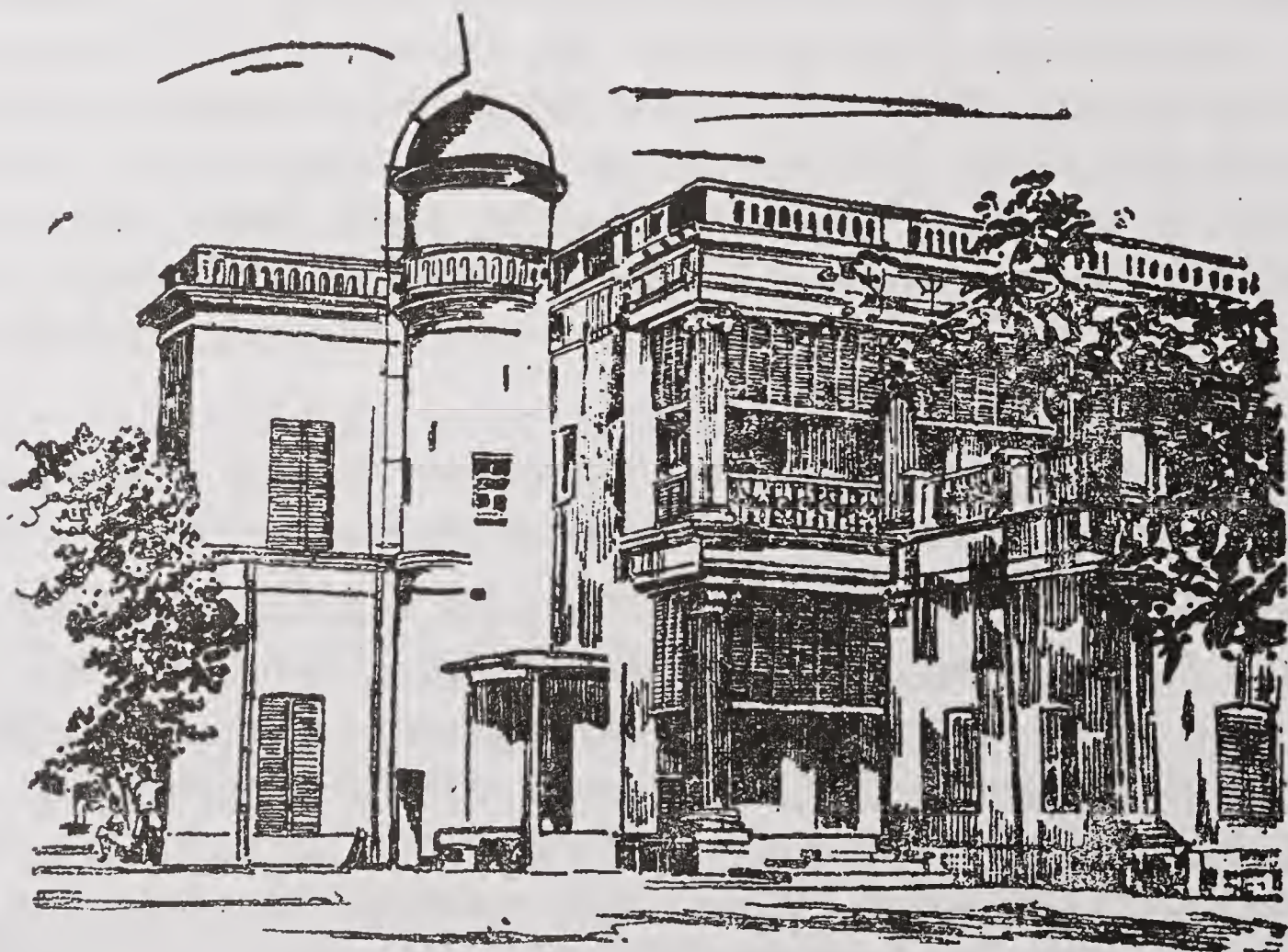
The area of the *ashram* was, as we have said before, about seven acres. The Santiniketan house was in the centre. Almost directly to the north of the house was the temple. The Chhatim tree on the north-west and in the south-west corner was a small three-roomed building. A row of trees lay on the south, and a mound, like a small hillock, on the east. The hillock was made by the earth excavated from the pond as its foot. A mango grove lay between the row of sal trees and the house. It

was an oasis in the vast empty upland which rolled nakedly away to the edge of space. Here and there lay an eroded hollow or a cluster of date palms.

The first step in building the school was the founding of a library and the setting up of a laboratory. Rabindranath brought all his own books and arranged them in the small three roomed building in the south-west corner. Some scientific apparatus also arrived. A dormitory for the students came next. Where was the money? He sold his house on the seaside at Puri and built a long tiled structure with verandahs on the north and south sides. This dormitory, parallel with the row of sal trees, later was known as the *Adi Kutir* or *Prak Kutir*.

Teachers and students shared the dormitory. How many were there at that time? The teachers were Sivadhan Vidyarnava, William Lawrence, Jagalong Ray and a Christian Sindhi monk by the name of Rewa Chand. Not long after came Brahmabandhava Upadhaya (Bhabani Charan Bandyopadhyay) and Hari Charan Bandyopadhyay. The students were Rathindranath, Srish Chandra Majumadar's son, Santosh Chandra Majumdar and three students of Brahmabandhava from Calcutta.

Rabindranath wished to follow the ancient ideal of the forest school. He was averse to the sale of learning and decided not to accept fees



Santiniketan, an abode of Peace

from the students. The teachers, as gurus, would give their learning freely and take only as much as they needed to maintain their families. None of the teachers brought his family. They lived with the students. Students and teachers had their meals together. But however low the expenses were kept, money was necessary. At that time Rabindranath received a monthly allowance of two hundred rupees only from the estate. The Puri house had been sold. Now he pawned Mrinalini Devi's jewels. And he also borrowed from his friends, in and out of season.

Rabindranath perhaps hoped that if he could organise the school on the ancient ideal of self-denial, society or the pillars of society would come forward with help. In olden times schools were maintained in that way. But the times were no longer the same. At the end of two years he decided to accept fees from the students sufficient to cover the expenses of their food and lodging. It goes without saying that the sum realised in this way was not sufficient to cover all the expense of the school. The Swadeshi business the two cousins started at Kushtia had failed. Rabindranath took upon his own shoulders a large part of the debt involved. He now had to find funds for the school as well. His indebtedness grew.

Poverty is not a great hardship when it is voluntarily undergone for the sake of a noble ideal. But when death steals away the bud from the ripened fruit as well, the blow is hard to bear. Death broke into Rabindranath's life with the suddenness of a storm when the school had just begun. The first year his wife, Mrinalini Devi, died. Six months later Rani, his second daughter, died. She was only twelve years old. The following year, 1904, he lost a young man who was as a son to him, Satish Chandra Ray. He died of small-pox, giving his life, so rich with great possibilities, almost as an offering to his guru, so keen was his idealism. Rabindranath was so profoundly agitated by his death that he closed the school and went to live at Shelaidah for a time. Six months later, after the summer holidays, he returned to the *ashram*. In the early part of 1905 the Maharshi passed away. He died in Calcutta. The most grievous blow came in the latter part of 1907. Samindra had been only six years old when his mother died. Her place had to be taken by the father. The beautiful poems in the book *Sisu* (Child) were written for Samindra. People say that Samindra resembled his father in many ways, in his looks, in his handwriting, and most of all, in the way he recited poetry. Samindra was stricken with cholera and died suddenly in the house of a friend he was visiting at Monghyr. In a

letter written twenty-five years later, in 1932, we get a glimpse of how Rabindranath faced the unbearable grief of his bereavement. He says:

“The night after Sami died I saw, as I sat in the train, the sky flooded with moonlight. Nowhere was there any diminution. My heart told me that nothing had been lost. All continues to exist in everything, myself with it. There is much for me to do yet, for this all. As long as I live I must work for it. Let the courage be there, let no feeling of aversion arise, let no uniting cord be broken, let me accept simply what has happened and let me not fail to acknowledge wholly with a straightforward heart what is left.” When we recall that this letter was written after the death of his only grandson, Nitu, the son of Mira, in order to console his daughter, we cannot but be amazed.

Rabindranath had to face difficulties other than financial and emotional also during the establishment of the school. The greatest of these was the school's organisation. He had visualised it as the material manifestation of his dream of an ideal forest school on the ancient pattern. There were many obstacles in the way of its realisation. The teachers posed problems. A true guru strives to bring the life of his pupil to fruition as a whole, in an integrated way. But a good teacher is not necessarily a good guru. Not all have the wholeness of vision, the conception of life in the round. Of those who came to teach at Santiniketan some emphasised things for which they themselves felt an affinity. Traditionalists assumed that by *brahmacharya* was meant a reversion to the age in which life was divided into four stages. The patriotic assumed that the chief object of the *ashram* was to emphasise differences between Western and Eastern civilisation and preach against the Western. And those primarily concerned with education thought that they had found the opportunity to evolve new methods of teaching the old things. The disciplinarians considered that the students could only be trained through the rigid observance of dull rules and regulations, diligence and hard labour.

Rabindranath slowly made his way through all these partial concepts, making unending experiments, taking apart and putting together, guiding his colleagues towards a universal ideal of education for all. From 1907-08 he gave his entire attention to the work of the school. He ceased to participate in the popular movements of the day and strove in devising an education that was integrated and whole, to give shape to a great future.

Some of those who came to the school in the early days either as teachers or as students have left a record of the period in their memoirs. When we read what they have to say we discover that, however torn inwardly the elders might have been by their many problems, the life led by the students was simple and healthy, replete with an unobscured happiness.

Let us describe a student's day as given by a distinguished student of that time, Sri Sudhiranjan Das, retired Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of India. In the book *Amader Santiniketan* he says:

"The day began very early, at five-thirty in winter and four-thirty in other seasons. The boys made their own beds and as they did so they recited the verses of scripture: *Lokesha Chaitanyamayadhideva*..... Finishing their ablutions while it was still dark, they took turns sweeping the dormitory. Then they bathed in water drawn freshly from the well, cold and invigorating. They bathed out doors all year round, under the open sky. They then went to their morning prayers. Each chose a secluded spot to his liking, spread a small woollen carpet and sat in silence for seven or eight minutes. Some would ofcourse occasionally throw bits of gravel at a chipmunk. After this individual meditation Rabindranath would join them for congregational prayer. The students saw him emerge from his house, *Dehali*, and walk with slow grave steps down the avenue of sal trees. The boys lined up and repeated the following prayer, chanting after him:

*Thou art the Father
May it be given us
To realise Thy Fatherhood.
Our obesiance to Thee.*

"Afterwards they changed their clothes, donning long saffron robes over their every day costumes. They breakfasted and went to class. Class meant that the boys sat down with their books in the leafy shade of some flowering tree forming a circle around their teacher. Rabindranath himself took classes regularly at that time, teaching Bengali and English. He wrote many textbooks. books intended to make the beginnings of the study of literature and language attractive and simple. The teachers included Jagandananda Ray, Hari Charan Bandyopadhyay, Ajit Kumar Chakravarty, Bhupendranath Sanyal, Vidhushekhar Bhattacharya, Kshiti Mohon Sen, Nepal Chandra Ray, Kali Mohon Ghose. Men of their quality could easily have earned both

wealth and fame elsewhere. But all of them, inspired by the example of Rabindranath, dedicated themselves to the school. And because they gave themselves so wholly it was easy to learn from them.

“Morning classes were over at ten-thirty or eleven. It was time for lunch. In those days the food was vegetarian. Rabindranath often joined the boys at their meals, he had no special place where he sat, making room for himself wherever he liked. The boys were eager for him to sit beside them. The boys washed their own dishes. After lunch they took turns looking after guests. It was not the custom to take a noon nap. They prepared their lessons for the afternoon classes.

“At two- or two-thirty classes started again. On days when it rained heavily the students were given a holiday. Boys and teachers set out to get wet in the rain. Singing songs of the rainy seasons as they went, they crossed the eroded land to the Kopai river, ending their excursion with a swim. When the rainstorm ended they would come back to the *ashram* and the teachers made ginger tea for everybody. The tea, which they drank in their wet clothes, was delicious, fit for the gods.

“On ordinary days everyone appeared on the playing field when classes were over, after tea. Some occupied themselves with carpentry and others with gardening. The work of the day was brought to an end with the mantra: “Thou who dwellest in fire, in water. Thou who art immanent everywhere”. . . Entertainment came next. No pressure was applied to study in the evenings.

Those who had a good singing voice learned songs from Dinendranath Tagore. To Rabindranath he was:

*Treasure of all my songs,
Helsman of my boat of melodies...*

Some evenings Rabindranath joined the boys. He made up stories for them and took part in guessing games. Sometimes they played games that distinguished between and sharpened the five senses. When the sky was clear and covered with stars the boys would go to the science laboratory. Jagadananda Ray taught them the names of the stars with the help of a telescope.”

Now and then a drama was staged. The festivals of the season were first performed in 1907. Samindra was the initiator. Sarodotsava for the autumn festival, was written the following year. *Mukut* (Crown), *Prayaschitta* (Atonement), *Raja* (King), *Dakghar* (The Post office) and

Achalayat (The Castle of Conservations) were written during the next four years. All these dramas were originally written for the school. There was no stage to speak of. Wooden cots were pushed together to make a kind of platform. Scenery presented no problem. The boys decorated the stage with their own clothes, matching the colours.

Rabindranath had no faith in what is usually called student discipline. He believed that if students are ever to learn to take the responsibility of looking after themselves, they should have the opportunity. The common assembly of the students was called the *Ashram Sammilani*. This Sammilani, with the help of a few elected officers, carried the burden of much of the daily routine work of the *ashram*. The students took the initiative in organising a night school, editing a paper, arranging literary gatherings, organising games and maintaining discipline. They could say truly:

To every task we turn our hands
To every task...

Every Wednesday a service was held in the temple. Rabindranath himself sounded the gong that announced the hour. Newly composed hymns were sung at the beginning of the service. Rabindranath would explain *extempore* the meaning of the song or expound some verse from the Upanishads. These sermons were later collected and published in a book form as Santiniketan. From 1907-08 onwards, special religious festivals were instituted to honour the memory of the founders of all the great religion on their birthdays.

In discussing the aims and objects and the teaching methods of the Santiniketan school, Rabindranath said:

“The chief object of this school is to make education an integral part of life. Intimate ties of kinship must be set up and maintained between the children of the *ashram* and the world of nature through knowledge, music, work and the festivals of the seasons. Relationships must be established with our neighbours in the human world as well as with the world of nature.

The relationship between students and teachers is not one of imparting or receiving knowledge only, it must be one of genuine kinship. In the observance of social customs, in the care of guests, in one's dealings with others, the habit of conducting oneself in a gracious and polite manner must be firmly inculcated. Part of this training in polite

behaviour consists in doing all things on time, being clean in ones clothes, surroundings, way of eating and moving about. Hospitality and the social graces must be practised and encouraged. Through the freedom to work and the freedom to take the responsibility for things they enjoy doing, the boys must come to feel that the school belongs to them, they as well as the teachers are helping to build an institution that is their own in a very special way. Most necessary of all is that they should cultivate their minds in co-operation with each other, just as they participate together in physical culture."

In 1911 Rabindranath entered his fiftieth year. The boys of the *ashram* celebrated his birthday with much merry-making. The substance of what he said to them on this occasion is given below, in his own words:

"This celebration today will be successful if my life is mingled with yours and becomes a part of yours, if you accept me as one of yourselves, your very own. Once upon a time I was born into my parent's home. Today I am born again outside their home, in the home of others. In this new home new ties bind me very closely, uniting me with many. That is why this is a day of joy. Man is born once for himself and again for others. This *ashram* is the place of your second birth, your initiation. In the home of your parents you knew yourselves only as sons of the family. Here you are enabled to discover yourselves in the midst of all. You begin to sense your own larger existence. This is the meaning of your second birth. A child keeps to its mother's lap until its strength develops. It is confined within the boundaries of home. It falls more often than it is able to stand. By our braving the obstacles in our way, by accepting sacrifice and sorrow, through many kinds of discipline and sustained endeavour, we the people of the world acquire and extend our right to liberty, *mukti*."

Very probably this celebration, inaugurated by the students, was the beginning of the annual celebration of the 25th of Vaisakha. The following year Rabindranath was felicitated upon the completion of his fiftieth year by Bengal in general at a meeting of the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad held at the Town Hall in Calcutta. For the occasion Satyendranath wrote:

We take glory from the pride of place you have in the world-assembly of poets.

Shortly before this meeting took place, a song Rabindranath had just composed was sung at the Maghotsav:

*O Thou, Dispenser of India's destiny.
Thou who leadest the minds of men.....*

This song is known to all today as the National Anthem of free India. In an essay he wrote at this time, *Bharatvarsher Itihaser Dhara* "The Course of Indian History", he showed how the spirit of India's destiny is guiding this great country through many differences and great diversities to a greater and more inclusive unity. He repeats this in his poem, *Bharat Tirtha* (India, Place of Pilgrimage):

*....they will give and take.
meet and bring together.
none shall be turned away
from shore of this
vast sea of humanity
that is India.*

This is also the message of his great novel *Gora* which was written during this period. His love for his country ripened and bore fruit in a love for all humanity, a humanity united within the borders of the land of his birth.

THE GITANJALI

MARCH 1912, Rabindranath was ailing. It was decided that he should go abroad for medical treatment. His boat was to sail from Chandpal Ghat in Calcutta. On the appointed day many friends and acquaintances came to bid him farewell. But the ship had to sail without him. Although he was not well he could not easily refuse the many social engagements he had in Calcutta or disappoint those who had asked him to lecture. On the day he was to leave, he felt giddy in the morning, lost his footing and fell.

On the advice of his doctor the journey was cancelled and he went to Shelaidah for rest. The old familiar banks of the Padma! It was March and the air was heavy with the scent of mango blossoms. In order to keep himself occupied he took in hand a task which he described as not indispensable. He began to translate into English selected poems from *Gitanjali*, *Gitimalya*, *Naivedya*, *Kheya* and other books. When he left for England several months later a small notebook was almost full. He continued the work of translation on board the ship.

In London, the artist Rothenstein looked after the poet. He had met Rabindranath several years earlier at the house of Abanindranath in Calcutta. The English painter was interested in reading some of the poet's work. The small notebook proved useful. The poet thought the artist was just being polite when he spoke of it enthusiastically a few days later. Rothenstein showed the notebook to the Irish poet Yeats. Yeats, so gifted himself, was also the friend of the gifted. He recognised Rabindranath at once as the poet for whom the whole Western world was waiting. At the suggestion of Yeats, English poets were invited to meet Rabindranath at Rothenstein's house. Yeats read a few of the translation to them in Rabindranath's presence. The reading came to an end. There was silence. The poets present had not a word to say. Silently they shook the poet's hand and went home. The following day letter after letter of congratulation began to arrive.

Standing silently on one side, behind all the famous people present, was a missionary who had been to India, a teacher at St. Stephen's

College in Delhi, Charles Freer Andrews. When he saw Rabindranath and heard him speak it seemed to him that the Christ of the Western world had been reborn as an Indian poet. The next day he went to Rabindranath's residence and said: "I place myself at your disposal. May I dedicate myself wholly to your work, command me!" Andrews served the poet as a friend and disciple the rest of his life.

And not only Andrews, others present also acknowledged Rabindranath's greatness as a poet. He was accepted as the representative of the east. The English translations of his poems, under the name of *Gitanjali*, appeared in book form toward the end of 1912.

This book created an unprecedented sensation in the intellectual circles of the West. The use of the machine and applied science had doubled and trippled the material prosperity of the West. People were fascinated by the growth of their industries and the spread of their empire. Literature, caught between a boastful pride of race and colour on the one hand and immense greed and selfishness on the other, was pervaded by a destructive complacency. It had become an article of luxury. Into this milieu came the English *Gitanjali*. The spiritual certainty, simply told as personal testament, and the sense of sancity which pervaded the poems seemed to challenge the West, saying: "Turn your eyes within you. Look away from outer things." Like the melody of the bamboo flute from the fields and meadows of Bengal this message entered the palace of the West.

Rabindranath went to America for a few months. It was his first visit. He lectured on the Upanishads, on India's spiritual message, her *sadhana*, on his *ashram* school. And he very frankly expressed his views on America's pressing problem, colour.

On the 14th April, 1913 Rabindranath reached London on his way back from America. He returned to India in October, completely cured. The people of the country had come to know of the fame and honour he had won abroad. The Calcutta University decided to bestow upon the poet its highest honour, the title of Dectorate of Literature. Before the convocation could be held, however, towards the end of the year, news came that the Nobel Prize for Literature had been awarded to Rabindranath for his English *Gitanjali*.

Rabindranath received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. It was the first time an Asian writer had been shown such an honour. Satyendranath Dutta's prophetic poem came true, word for word.

The honour pleased Rabindranath chiefly because the money was needed for a good purpose. Village upliftment work was in full swing at Patisar. A bank had been founded to provide loans to the cultivators at a low rate of interest by a welfare organisation known as the Hitashi Sabha. The money was deposited in this bank. The interest was to be used for the school at Santiniketan.

The name of Rabindranath became known world over after he received the Nobel Prize. One book sufficed to reveal the universality of his poetic genius. The poet's own words came true:

*Thou hast made known
To friends whom I knew not
Thou hast given my seats
In homes not my own.
Thou hast brought the distant near
And made a brother of the stranger.*

EAST AND WEST

RABINDRANATH returned from the West with a mind acutely aware of the whole world. He felt that the good of mankind could be affected only by uniting the Western *sadhana* of work with the East's *sadhana* of the spirit.

How was the union to be affected? Who was to bring them together through giving and taking? Differences of country, creed, race, colour! Where was an ideal universe, enough to bind all the variegated aspects of the human scene together?

This unity, Rabindranath declared, must be created by India and the responsibility of maintaining it shouldered by India and especially, as a place of pilgrimage, by Santiniketan. In a letter written to Andrews in 1913 he said that the *ashram* must be linked up with the *sadhana* of the world at large.

In his heart he threw open the doors of India's temple at Santiniketan to this ideal. Andrews was the first he welcomed from the West. At a formal reception held at Santiniketan in 1914 (April) he addressed him thus:

*From the shrine of the West
you have brought us living water;
We welcome you, friend.
The East has offered you
her garland of love.
Accept it and welcome, friend.
Your love has opened
the door of our heart;
Enter, and welcome, friend
You have come to us
as a gift of the Lord,
We bow to Him, friend.*

Andrews, a Christian clergyman, had been selected to teach at St.

Stephen's College in Delhi. He gave up his appointment there and became a humble teacher of the *ashram* school. His spirit wept for the poor, for the humiliated, for the people of India. He travelled constantly, trying to alleviate the suffering and distress of those who, uprooted from their country and torn away from their homes, worked their whole lives as coolies on the tea plantations of British masters in Darjeeling and Assam or as indentured labour in the Fijis, in Mauritius, in Africa. People therefore called him Dinabandhu, the friend of the poor. He was never able to settle down anywhere. But if he had a true home at all, it was at the Santiniketan *ashram*. For twenty-five long years his connection with Rabindranath and with Santiniketan was unbroken.

Rabindranath gained two fast friends through Andrews. One of them was a young Englishman named Willy Pearson and the other was Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, on whom the poet later conferred the title of Mahatma. When Gandhiji left South Africa and was about to return to India the students of his Phoenix school found shelter under the affectionate care of Rabindranath at Santiniketan. Gandhiji also stayed in the *ashram* for some time with his family. The two great men met for the first time in March 1915 at Santiniketan.

The red glow that Rabindranath had noticed in the Western sky broke into flame not long after he came away. It was the funeral pyre of Western civilisation.

*The selfish fight the selfish
And greed battles greed.*

This, the first World War, started in August 1914 and spread from country to country. Many were the cities and dwellings which were laid waste. Many were those who died, plunging into the flames like insects.

While this dance of doom was in progress in Europe, Rabindranath set forth once more, in May 1916. Andrews and Pearson were his companions on his travels. Mighty Japan was set upon building an empire in China in imitation of Western imperialism. And in the United States of America a great new country was developing, opulent with the riches of industrial progress. Neither of these two countries had yet joined the war. The poet wished to visit them, to tell them that the machine of man's invention should not be turned into the instruments of his own destruction, that he should not sell his soul for a few inches

of land, that man should not be separated from each other by an ugly national arrogance.

As he spoke of these things he also told them about what he was trying to do in his own field of work, of his efforts to give and take all that is good in man, and to build up a bulwark of friendliness between people and countries. He intended to plant the seed of universal peace at Santiniketan with the help of the Far East and the United States of America, if he could win them over or find them favourably disposed. In October 1916 he wrote from Los Angeles: "The Santiniketan school must be made India's vital link with the rest of the world. The age of narrow nationalism is drawing to an end. The great union of countries and peoples which is being prepared for the future must have its first beginning on the Bolpur plain. "

This time Rabindranath was abroad for a full year. Day after day he lectured, visiting the great cities of Japan and America. He denounced narrow nationalism in no uncertain terms. In both countries those intoxicated with power turned against him. The enthusiasm with which he was at first received as a universal poet gradually waned. There was nothing surprising in that. Could any worshipper of power tolerate a person who shook the throne on which his divinity was seated?

Rabindranath came home in March 1917 alone and, so to speak, empty-handed. He realised how little respect the people of powerful free nations have for those who are subject. They humiliate them with alms. He busied himself with many things on his return. He wished to wipe every trace of his sense of indignity and frustration from his mind.

A society which devoted itself to literature, music, art and drama had made his red brick house at Jorasanko the centre of its activities. The name of the society was *Vichitra*. It was flourishing. Abanindranath, Gogonendranath and the poet's son, Rathindranath, were all happily engaged with it. The poet joined enthusiastically and *Vichitra* rapidly became the chief centre of attraction for the cultured society of Calcutta.

It was at this time that the poet proposed to Michael Sadler that the mother tongue of the people of Bengal be made the medium of instruction. And he wrote the *Tota Kahini* (The Parrot's Training), a fierce satire on learning by rote.

A controversy was raging over the question of whether Bengali as it is spoken, i. e. , in its colloquial form, was suitable for use in literary

works or whether a stylised and artificial language was preferable. Rabindranath, in support of the cause of the natural, easy-flowing, colloquial speech of the people wrote so many beautiful pieces in the page of a periodical named *Sabuj Patra* that the Bengali reader took his side very quickly and the cause was won within a fairly short time.

He also wrote political pieces, both gentle and fiery. Once more he associated himself with the Congress and sought to represent the more progressive elements. And he withdrew from leadership as soon as the elders accepted the progressive suggestion of the younger. At the request of the organisers he consented to read a poem at the Calcutta Congress session, a poem in English. He named the poem *India's Prayer*:

Let this be our prayer to Thee—

Give us power to resist pleasure where it enslaves us,

To lift our sorrow up to Thee as the summer holds its noonday sun.

Make us strong that our worship may flower in love, and bear fruit in work.

Make us strong that we may not insult the weak and the fallen.

That we may hold our love high where all things around us are wooing the dust.

They fight and kill for self-love, giving it Thy name.

They fight for hunger that thrives on brother's flesh.

They fight against Thine anger and die.

But let us stand firm and suffer and strength.

for the true, for the Good, for the Eternal in man,

for Thy kingdom which is the union of hearts and for

the freedom which is of the soul.

VISVA-BHARATI

THE year 1918 brought two great sorrows to Rabindranath, both heavy blows. Word came that his friend Pearson, who had been his travelling companion in Japan and America, was accused of being involved in anti-British activities. He had been arrested on this false charge and sent back to England. It was war-time. No one knew for certain what would happen. Rabindranath was most affected by the plight of Pearson. He felt dejected.

And his eldest daughter, Bela, took to bed with a fatal illness. Every day he drove from Jorasanko to her residence to see her, taking a companion with him. The companion would wait in the carriage. One day, as Rabindranath mounted the steps, he stopped suddenly, turned back and returned silently to his place in the carriage. His companion looked at him questioningly. Rabindranath said. "It's all over." That evening the poet looked after the guests who gathered to attend a meeting of Vichitra with all his usual courtesy and solicitude. No social lapse was permitted.

For refuge, he turned to his *ashram* and plunged into the work of the school. Teachers had begun to do research in their leisure time, Vidhusekhara Bhattacharya was deeply engrossed in the study of the Vedas, the Puranas and the Buddhist scriptures. A monk, learned in the Pali language and literature, had come from Ceylon. Kshiti Mohan Sen was studying the saints of the Middle Ages and a Bengali religious sect known as the bauls. Hari Charan Bandyopadhyaya was collecting words and studying them in the course of compiling his huge Bengali dictionary. Rabindranath encouraged their work and inspired their efforts, giving them guidance through the thoughtful discussion of their various subjects. He procured for them the books and papers they required.

Dinendranath Tagore and Bhimrao Shastri were teaching the singing classes, giving the students expert instructions. Surendranath Kar and Asit Kumar Halder were teaching art. Nandlal Bose was on the point of joining them.

Taking the school as a whole there was not much to boast about. Rabindranath advocated loftiness in ideas rather than in material things. So we find him laying the foundation of his much dreamed-about university, Visva-Bharati, amidst external poverty. In the words of the following poem from Naivedya he seemed to wish to say:

*Slight is the outward show, O India.
Of the wisdom thou hast taught us.
Modest to the eye, inwardly
It spreads its splendour.*

The foundation stone of the University was laid in December 1918. Drums were not beaten. There was no elaborate fuss. Like many other great things, Visva-Bharati began in unadorned solemnity.

The following year, 1919, students began to arrive by ones and twos. The work of Visva-Bharati started after the summer holidays, side by side with the work of the school. About the infant institution Rabindranath said: "A child is weak when it first appears in the world. Truth, as the child, is credible; we can believe in it. Visva-Bharati is a great spirit, a noble feeling, but it has appeared amongst us in an infant's guise. "

The spirit to which Rabindranath sought to give expression in the founding of Visva-Bharati was, briefly, the following:

India must relate itself to the world by ties that are true. Relationships based on material possessions, or wealth, or power, are external, extraneous.

India is a poor country, a subject country. She has neither great possessions nor wealth. What she does possess is inner riches.

India accepts the truth of humanity as the greatest of all truths. People of many countries and races, colours and creeds and tongues have been brought together in India by historical necessity and divine purpose.

Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Sikh, Christian and Muslim creeds have brought their great religious traditions, flowing and mingling in the single indivisible sea of India's humanity.

The greatest fact about man is that he belongs to all times and to all countries. All men have, by virtue of their birth, a right to participate in man's quest for truth in the West and the East alike. This Visva-

Bharati shall be the place where this common quest for truth shall unite India with the world. Let man here receive from his fellowmen, rich gifts of the spirit, holy offerings.

The purpose of the school is to set man free through the joyousness of his natural surroundings. By the addition of Visva-Bharati another purpose has been joined to it: the liberation of man in his human environment, in his relations with his fellowmen. Geographical boundaries have been reduced today by the improvement effected through modern means of communication. Men approach other men. The world as a whole is now confronted with the problem India faced and overcame in ancient times, the problem of human fellowship. Can man who has drawn close to his brother-men separate himself and hold himself aloof with the old habitual arrogance? If he does, the atmosphere will be contaminated by the virulent poison of suspicion, hatred, conflict and slaughter. Human civilisation will be overtaken by sudden and untimely destruction. If men are to live as human beings they must associate together in the fields of knowledge, of humanity of spiritual endeavour. India is a place of pilgrimage for those who seek unity in diversity, and this Santiniketan is India's pilgrim centre where an egalitarian creed affords shelter to all men. Santiniketan is therefore a place where the truth-seekers of all the world, with their different disciplines, can come together and, through mutual exchange establish ties of kinship with each other by means of the truth. This is the meaning of the name Visva-Bharati, the significance of its choice.

After establishing Visva-Bharati, Rabindranath set out to travel through the country. He spoke about Visva-Bharati in the South, at Bangalore, Mysore, Ootacamund, Coimbatore, Salem, Tiruchirappalli, Madurai, Madras and other places.

The following year, 1920, he toured the western part of India. At Ahmedabad, Bhavnagar, Limbdi, Baroda, Surat, Bombay and other places he lectured, returning to Santiniketan in May. Not long after he undertook a world tour. Visva-Bharati had to be made known. It was the first time he was to visit Europe since receiving the Nobel prize. This time he visited countries on the continent as well as England, and he spent several months in the United States of America.

Between 1913 and 1920 some twenty of Rabindranath's books were translated and published in English and other European languages. Foreign readers had become acquainted with his poems, plays, stories,

novels, essays. The name Tagore was almost a household word on the continent and in England.

He received the warmest welcome of all in Germany. Six years earlier a war-mad Germany had, under the leadership of the Kaiser, plunged the whole world into war. Now its military pride was defeated and the country wore the desolate aspect of a battle-field. Rabindranath's books sold there in thousands. Wherever he went people lined the streets and bowed their heads in respect. Women bowed before him, touching the hem of his robe with their lips.

Why was he so honoured? For what was there such a great yearning? Rabindranath knew that the honour was an acknowledgement of the message of humanity so deeply imbedded in the heart of India, the message to which he had sought to give expression in his writings. The people who had striven to become great through conflict now sought peace and reconciliation. Europe was the chief factory of nations and it was now frightened by the bogey of narrow nationalism. The honour that was shown to Rabindranath in Europe was as great as any ever shown to a ruler. When a man is suffering he seeks a healer—a healer who knows the remedy for his affliction. In these matters men do not make any social discrimination.

During the year he spent abroad Rabindranath met many leading writers and thinkers. With Bergson, Sylvain Levi, Romain Rolland, Keyserling, Thomas Mann, Winternitz, Lesny and others he discussed the ideals of Visva-Bharati. They talked with him gladly, exchanging views without hesitation with this man from the East. He invited several of them to India. The first to accept his invitation was the French savant, Sylvain Levi. Levi received an invitation from Harvard, the famous American university, at the same time. He chose Visva-Bharati, accepting the hospitality offered to him by this obscure institution.

On the 23rd of December 1921, at the annual convocation in the mango grove, Rabindranath dedicated Visva-Bharati to the people of his country. The land, the buildings, the library, the income from the Nobel prize money, copyright in his books, everything was made over to Visva-Bharati. Prof. Levi was present at the meeting as the representative of the West. Acharya Brojendranath Seal, widely esteemed as a savant and philosopher, accepted the gift on behalf of the world whose representative he truly was. Acharya Brojendranath said: "To discover ourselves we must discover the world. In establishing the world in our

midst we shall know ourselves better and so become better able to give our message to the world.”

The following was taken as the motto of Visva-Bharati:

This is Visva-Bharati where the world makes a home in a single nest.

The aims and objects of Visva-Bharati were defined thus:

“Briefly we declare its aim: We are of the faith that Truth is one and undivided though diverse may be the ways which lead us to it. Through separate paths pilgrims from different lands arrive at the same shrine of Truth. This we verily know.

Knowledge flows in two streams—from the East and from the West. In this unity is perceived the oneness of Truth that pervades and sustains the entire universe. This we avow. In the realisation of the oneness of Truth lies mighty gain, perfect peace and profound good for Man. This we truly believe.

So unto Visva-Bharati we render our homage by weaving garlands with flowers of learning gathered from all quarters of the earth. To all devotees of Truth, both from the West and from the East, we extend our hand with love.”

Varied activities flourished at Visva-Bharati. The departments which grew up in Rabindranath’s lifetime were: Vidya Bhavana (1918), Kala Bhavana (1919), Sangeet Bhavana (1919), Siksha Bhavana (1921), Sriniketan (1922) Silpa Bhavana (1937), China Bhavana (1937) and Hindi Bhavana (1939).

We must give Sriniketan our particular attention or else the appropriateness of Rabindranath’s plans for the reconstruction of his country and their unique character will remain hidden from us.

SRINIKETAN

WHILE he was living at Shelaidah, Rabindranath realised that to set about village work with the patronising manner of the city-bred is merely wasteful. Villages were beautiful, prosperous and salubrious at one time. Ponds were full of fish, cows filled the sheds and the bins burst with grain. Weavers and potters and smiths and carpenters lived in the villages. Education was provided through the *tol* schools and *pathsalas*. There were more festivals in the year than months. *Kirtan* singing was common. The villagers entertained themselves through the *jatra* performances. The chief reason for the breaking up of this self-contained village community was the attraction of urban life and the economic factors involved in the growth of the cities.

After winning the Battle of Plassey (1757) the English settled permanently in Calcutta. They were a handful of foreigners. For them it was convenient to establish cities and rule the country through them. The strange and wonderful city of Calcutta sprang up where only a few fishermen's huts had been before. Towns, in imitation of Calcutta, appeared all over the country. Shining streets and ghats, clean neat houses, schools, colleges, hospitals, shops and markets, were their features. The foreign bosses lived in the cities. They were the masters. The aristocratic landowners who had administered their estates from their country seats, no longer felt inclined to live in rustic surroundings. Migration to the city became general. Only the tillers of the soil remained. *Peepul* trees began to grow out of cracks in temple walls, dust accumulated in temple pavilions, weeds overgrew the ponds, malaria engulfed the country. Those who were the heads of society, moved to the towns and cities. To their children and grandchildren the villages appeared crude and uncouth. They held the village at a distasteful distance.

Having lived ten long years in a village Rabindranath knew:

*Those we discard are a drag on our progress;
Those we demean are our shackles.*

He knew that people who assume a patronising attitude towards the village are the ones to be pitied, not the villagers. These self-styled gentlefolk have no qualifications for village service, nor have they the right to engage in it. If those who have crippled the villages, who have weakened them, attempt to return to them as saviours, the villages will reject them. To work haphazardly in an amateurish way, without understanding, is to add to the real work to be done.

In 1904, at the time the country was in turmoil over the proposed partition of Bengal, Rabindranath read out to a Calcutta gathering an essay entitled *Swadeshi Samaj*. In this essay he stated clearly the true nature of the problems before the country, and the method of awakening the vital strength of the villagers. The political leaders of the day laughed his words away. They were intoxicated with the idea of turning out the English with their fine English oratory. He then set out to discover how much he could do by his unaided effort.

The first two students of the *ashram* school, Rathindranath and Santosh Chandra, were sent to the United States of America after they passed the entrance examination. They went to study agricultural science at the Illinois University in order to be able to help village become self-reliant and bring real progress to the country. That was in 1906. During 1907-08 we find the poet managing the school with one hand while with the other he initiated various schemes for village upliftment on an experimental basis at Patisar and Shelaidah. His chief assistants in this work were Kali Mohan Ghose and some other young men from East Bengal. In February 1908 Rabindranath presided over the provincial conference held at Pabna and attempted once more to draw the attention of the country to the villages. He gave straightforward advice about the cultivation of a spirit of co-operation in the village, use of labour-saving devices, revival of cottage industries community training and health instruction. There were very few in the country at that time with the vision to understand what he had learned by experience.

From 1906 to 1909 Rathindranath and Santosh Chandra were away studying. When they returned Santosh joined the school at once. Rabindranath had his assistance in introducing gardening by the students, cow-keeping, handicrafts and games. Rathindranath looked after the estates and tried to introduce labour-saving devices and improved methods of agriculture at Patisar and Shelaidah. The villagers took part enthusiastically in the work of welfare societies, setting up of

schools, settlement of disputes outside the courts through the Panchayats, and for the establishment of a bank to provide loans to cultivators at a low rate of interest.

Rabindranath was seeking a way to link the school at Santiniketan with the villages in a way beneficial to both. Perhaps the possibility of doing this was in his mind when, while in England in 1912-13, he purchased the lands and the building at Surul from Col Narendra Prasad Sinha of Raipur.

The necessity of integrating education with the life of the country was the subject of much importance that Rabindranath wrote after the founding of Visva-Bharati. In a lecture at Adyar he said: "If a true school is to be founded in India the school must, from the beginning, group around it all the neighbouring villages and vitally unite them with itself in all its economic endeavours, cultivation of land, sanitation and all practical sciences, thus establishing a centre of life in the country. This school will make use of the best methods in agriculture, breeding of livestock and development of village craft like weaving. The teachers, students and people of the surrounding countryside will be related to each other by the strong and intimate ties of livelihood. They shall co-operate to produce all the necessities for their own existence."

It was in accordance with this ideal that, not long after the formal inauguration of Visva-Bharati on the 23rd of December, 1921, a Rural Reconstruction Centre was set up at Surul. The date was the 6th of February, 1922. The Centre was named Sriniketan. 'Sri' means beauty, happiness and prosperity. Sriniketan was established in the hope that it would be able to restore these three graces to the villages which had lost them.

Leonard Elmhirst was the first Director of Sriniketan. He was an idealistic and energetic young man. Foremost of those who were his enthusiastic colleagues were Kali Mohan Ghose, Harry Timbers, an American doctor, Santosh Chandra Majumdar, Gour Gopal Ghose and Kasahara — a Japanese expert in wood-work and gardening.

After acquiring practical experience by working in Surul and the neighbouring villages, Mr. Elmhirst brought to the poet the conclusions he had reached. Together they then formulated the aims and objects of Sriniketan to the following effect: The villagers deserve our respect as men. The life of the village must be studied as a whole, known and

understood with courteous attention. The right to serve a village is won only when a relationship of mutual respect and consideration has been established with it. The problems of the village cannot be solved by taking them separately or detaching them from the life of the village. They must be dealt with together. The agriculture, education, health, crafts, social structure and culture of a village are different and complementary aspects of a single whole; they are interdependent. Thought must be given to finding ways of solving the problems connected with these. Enthusiasm by itself cannot accomplish this task. There is a way of work, means and methods of work, which must be learned by study and experience. The solution of a problem can only be placed before the villagers if it is a satisfactory solution. If the villagers, individually or as a whole, accept this solution of their own accord, one's service is successful. The chief purpose of village work should be to base all endeavour upon the strength of self-reliance and co-operation. Beauty, health, and happiness shall be restored to the village by the efforts of the villagers themselves.

A whole book would have to be written separately to describe all the experiments which have taken place at Sriniketan at various times. Perhaps it will be enough to say that the plan for village upliftment adopted by the Congress under Gandhiji's leadership and the measures undertaken by Government for the development of the rural community all over the country had, in many respects, their origin in the work and inspiration of Sriniketan.

Rabindranath did not have the means to carry out his plans for village upliftment on a large scale. The money that was spent at Sriniketan was supplied, for the most part, by Mr. Elmhirst during a period of twenty five years. Yet, though the work was on a small scale, the ideal of truth it upheld was untarnished. Several years before his death Rabindranath said:

"I cannot shoulder the responsibility for the whole of India all by myself. I wish to win only one or two not very large villages. Their hearts must be won and the strength to work with them mustered. If I am able only to set two or three villages free from the fetters of inability and ignorance, a small model for the whole India will have been created. All will receive education, the village will be filled with the breath of happiness. There will be music, kirtan singing and readings..... I shall say that these villages constitute my India."

In 1921 Rabindranath completed his sixty-first year. Most people withdraw from a life of active work in their old age and wish to pass their time in peace and comfort. But there was no rest for Rabindranath until the work he had begun was brought to a conclusion. As long as his health permitted he travelled tirelessly in his own country and in other lands—from the age of sixty to the age of seventy-five. He enjoyed seeing new places, it is true. To behold the world in all its variety pleased him as much as binding its diversity into unity. And he was a poet, an artist. To know men and make himself known was his dharma. He wrote:

*My home is everywhere
I seek it desperately
My country is everywhere.
I shall fight to win it.
In every home there dwells
My closest of kin.
I seek him everywhere.*

The effort involved in this continual travel made it not always pleasant. When he most desired to be alone, in quiet and seclusion, he was obliged to go down into the market-places and stand in the crowds. When his spirit yearned for stillness and silence he had to lecture to large audiences day after day.

He was forced to approach the doors of the miserly rich, begging-bowl in hand. From port to port, from city to city he dragged himself wearily. He was often misunderstood and frequently opposed. He yearned to return to the peace of his *ashram* but he was not to be allowed to sit still. Travelling an endless road he went, explaining to people the ideals of Visva-Bharati. The cultured were invited to visit the nest he had made for all mankind. He wished to win the sympathy of all of them in this great task. Holy water must be brought home from all the sacred places of both East and West. How could the world-embracing task he had begun be brought to a successful conclusion unless his joy was shared, unless all became interested?

A bare list of the places he visited during his travels would make a separate pamphlet. With the exception of New Zealand and Australia he set foot on every great country of the world.

Wherever he went, he took the greatest interest in understanding the people and learning about their countries. His letters, diaries and poems are full of references to the places he came to know and the friends he made there. This eagerness to learn, to become familiar with the unknown, to approach closer to the distant, brought him a great deal of warm affection both at home and abroad. No other Asian writer has had so many of his books translated into so many languages, touched so many hearts and become known to so wide an audience.

When, in his very old age, the poet looked back, he said: "East and West joined hands in friendship in me, my own person. In my spirit I have realised the meaning of my name Rabi (or the Sun)."

THE MAHATMA AND GURUDEVA

WHEN, in 1918, Rabindranath was eagerly seeking to bring India and the rest of the world together on the basis of a common humanity, the country joked about his internationalism and looked upon it as a poetic flight of imagination. Today the people of India know that the preparatory work done by Rabindranath in the countries of both the East and the West is now to some extent incorporated in the Panchsheel and UNESCO.

Be that as it may, Rabindranath's relationship with Gandhiji is the subject in hand. The Jallianwala Bagh massacre took place a few months after the founding of Visva-Bharati in December 1918. Rabindranath, finding that his contrymen were cowed into dumb anguish of terror, protested on their behalf renouncing the knighthood which the British had conferred upon him. In a letter to the Viceroy he said that if in a subject country innocent and unarmed people are shut down, any badge of honour the ruler may bestow becomes incompatible and unacceptable.

The course of events during the agitation which swept the country following the Jallianwala Bagh massacre brought Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi into the forefront of the struggle. He took the lead. The weapon he chose was non-violent, non-cooperation. Like Dhananjay Vairagi in the drama *Prayaschitta* (Atonement), he entered politics in the name of truth.

Unfortunately, although Gandhiji himself was wholly well-intentioned, noble in spirit and without a trace of rancour, an ugly hatred of the British and a grim nationalism took possession of the minds and hearts of the people and showed itself in all their actions. Rabindranath was in England at that time (1920), he had not the slightest sympathy with all excesses that were committed during the non-cooperation movement. While he was preaching mutual cultural exchange between India and the rest of the world, the political excitement of the times gained entrance into his *ashram* with violent effects. This

was not in the least to his liking. He had no time to spare for politics that had invaded his *ashram* and polluted its atmosphere and produced a negative attitude of rejection in the minds of his countrymen. He had always wanted his people to develop self-reliance, trust the strength of their own spirit and engage in constructive work that was for the good of the country. He liked least of all the boycott of schools and colleges. He objected strongly to the drawing of immature young men into the mainstream of politics because of their enthusiasm.

Rabindranath returned to India in July 1921. Gandhiji visited him at Jorasanko early in September. They discussed non-cooperation. The talks took place in a closed room and the only other person present was C. F. Andrews. The two did not agree and there was an exchange of words which was even carried into print. Rabindranath expressed his fear that non-cooperation was a weapon which, if it fell into unfit hands, could lead to violence. And that was what happened. An angry mob set fire to police station at Chauri Chaura, a village in Bihar, early in 1922. Gandhiji called a stop to the movement. Gandhiji had called Rabindranath 'The Great Sentinel'. That was an apt appellation: He was vigilant lest evil enter into the life of his country, as vigilant as a sleepless sentinel at the gates of a citadel.

In assessing the relationship between these two great men of that age we find that at no time did either lose his respect for and show lack of esteem to the other, however much they might have differed. In May 1925 Gandhiji visited Santiniketan to request Rabindranath to approve of his Charkha programme. Andrews once more acted as a go-between. This time also they did not agree. Words were exchanged. Yet in 1930 when Rabindranath was in England he spoke warmly of Gandhiji's great leadership and consistently spoke of its rightness in his conversations and lectures. On the 4th of January, 1932 the British Government arrested Gandhiji and imprisoned him without trial. Rabindranath cut short the programme arranged for the celebration of his seventieth birthday. In September the same year, when Gandhiji fasted in Yervada prison on the issue of caste and untouchability, the poet was deeply distressed. He called upon his countrymen to do away with untouchability. "Do not be the cause of the death of a great man." he said. He hastened to Poona. On his arrival he was told that Gandhiji had consented to break his fast on receiving certain assurances. Rabindranath sat beside Gandhiji's prison cot and lifted a bowl of fruit

juice, placing it in hands thin with starvation. At Gandhiji's request the aged poet sang in a quavering voice:

*When the heart is hard and parched
Come upon me with a shower of mercy.
When grace is lost from life.
Come with a burst of song.*

After the Bihar earthquake some two years later (1934) Rabindranath took exception to Gandhiji's statement that this natural calamity was divine punishment for the sinful attitude of caste Hindus towards untouchables. He could not accept the illogical notion that men can by their sins interfere with nature. He declared that if the Mahatma encouraged such a superstitious attitude, it would be fatal for the country.

In 1936 Rabindranath was seventy five. The burden of Visva-Bharati was growing too heavy for him to bear. To whom could he carry his troubles?

It was to Gandhiji that he spoke of the hardship of having to beg crusts for his institution in his old age. He was no longer physically capable of the task. There was no money for Visva-Bharati at the end of the year (1935-36). The deficit amounted to sixty thousand rupees. Donning the long robe of a *baul* the aged poet took up his sack and set out with his troupe. The need for money was urgent but there was also a spiritual need. The poet had recently composed a new type of drama combining dance, song and drama. He called it dance-drama. The new play, *Chitrangada*, was taken on tour. The proceeds from the sale of tickets were to feed the hunger of Visva-Bharati and the public was to be given the opportunity of seeing a new experiment in theatre art in Calcutta, Patna, Allahabad, Lahore. From Lahore the troupe came to Delhi. Gandhiji was distressed that the poet, in his extreme old age, should be obliged to raise funds for Visva-Bharati this manner. Through the good offices of one of his followers he presented a cheque to him, a cheque for sixty thousand rupees, sufficient to cover the deficit. He asked the poet not to go out on tour again. That was, in fact, the last of Rabindranath's begging expeditons on behalf of Visva-Bharati.

The next year, 1937, Rabindranath fell dangerously ill. He fell into comatose condition for nearly forty-eight days following an attack of erysipelas. Gandhiji telegraphed anxiously again and again making

solicitous inquiries. The first letter that Rabindranath wrote with his own hand when he recovered was addressed to Gandhiji. Each was concerned for the health of the other and when one was ill the other was upset. They made joint efforts to obtain the release of political prisoners when the first draft of Gandhiji's plan for Basic Education was shown to him, Rabindranath said that greater attention had been paid to livelihood than to life. The aim of education should be the development of a whole and integrated personality.

Some years passed. In February 1940 he read that Gandhiji was coming to Bengal. Rabindranath immediately invited him to visit Santiniketan. Gandhiji came with his wife and other members of his party. This time Andrews was not there. He was lying ill in a Calcutta nursing home. His illness depressed both his friends. A formal reception was given to Gandhiji in the mango grove. Rabindranath garlanded the guest, saying, "Homage to the great, naturally seeks its manifestation in the language of simplicity and we offer to you these few words to let you know that we accept you as our own, as one belonging to all humanity." Gandhiji said, "Even though I call this visit a pilgrimage, allow me to say that I am no visitor here. I feel as if I have come to my own home. . . I have received Gurudeva's blessings and my heart is full to the brim with joy."

The next day, as Gandhiji was about to leave, Rabindranath placed a letter in his hands. "Accept this institution under your protection, giving it an assurance of permanence if you consider it to be a national asset. Visva-Bharati is like a vessel carrying the cargo of my life's best treasure and I hope it may claim special care from my countrymen for its preservation." Gandhiji replied. "Of course, Visva-Bharati is a national institution. It is undoubtedly also international. You may depend upon my doing all I can in the common endeavour to assure its permanence. Though I have always regarded Santiniketan as my second home, this visit has brought me nearer to it than ever before."

Gandhiji did not forget the poet's request. In May 1942 he raised five lakh rupees to help Visva-Bharati by creating the Andrews Memorial Fund. Shortly before his death Gandhiji shared his concern for Visva-Bharati with Nehru and Abdul Kalam Azad, and through the efforts of the national government, Parliament granted a charter to Visva-Bharati in 1951, making it a Central University.

Rabindranath was taken ill suddenly at Kalimpong towards the end of September 1940. He was brought to Calcutta for medical treatment in an unconscious condition. Mahadev Desai came from Sevagram with a message from Gandhiji two days later. Rabindranath had regained consciousness that day but his mind was overcast. Someone spoke close to his ear, "Gandhiji has sent Mahadev Desai to inquire after you." Rabindranath said nothing. Tears flowed from his eyes. His daughter-in-law, Pratima Devi, was standing beside him. In her book *Nirvana* she writes: "It was the first time I had seen tears in his eyes."

The poet recovered. Towards the close of the year he made up a little verse about Gandhiji:

*Followers of Gandhi Maharaj,
Some rich, some destitute,
We all have one thing in common,
We neither fill our bellies by robbing the poor
Nor bend our knees to the rich.*

In 1941, the next year, it was decided that, as the 25th of *Vaisakha* fell during the summer holidays, the first of *Vaisakha* would henceforth be celebrated as the poet's birthday. It was the first day of the Bengali year. A telegram arrived from Gandhiji:

"Four scores not enough. May you finish five. Love"

Rabindranath replied:

"Thanks message but four-score is impertinence. Five-score intolerable."

Gandhiji came to Santiniketan for the last time in December 1945. Someone asked him about the reported differences he had with the poet. Gandhiji answered with a smile: "I have found no real conflict between us. I started with disposition to detect a conflict between Gurudeva and myself but ended with the glorious discovery that there was none."

CREATIVE VARIETY

RABINDRANATH'S life was like a mighty river. Its source lay in the meditative reaches of the distant Himalayas, and its journey drew to an end in the immensity of the ocean. As it approaches the estuary a river grows impatient, for the call of the deep is audible. Dividing innumerable rivulets it hurries faster and faster, with an ever-growing eagerness. And at last it merges, with all its multiplicity, into the single surpassing wholeness of the one without a second.

We find this multiplicity in the life of Rabindranath. His life was long, covering the last forty years of the nineteenth century and the first forty of the twentieth. His mental activity ranged from the pre-*Puranic* period of the *Upanishads* to the still unmanifest future. The world of his imagination was extensive and his prolific creative powers produced poetry, stories, novels, essays, dramas, music and paintings. There was no aspect of human life with which he did not concern himself at one time or the other. The innumerable ways in which he expressed himself, in melody, forms, rhythm, colour, line, knowledge, works, amaze us when we consider them.

Any attempt to find the whole man in the detail of his daily life is doomed to failure. For his future biographers he left the warning:

*Seek me not in externals
Nor look at me from outside
The poet is not where you think he is.*

A creator reveals himself in his creation. The true way to discover Rabindranath is to study his works. In the appendix the titles of some of his outstanding books, selected from the body of his collected works, are given.

It is impossible to form any idea of his many works with any brevity. If attention is directed only to what he did during the last twenty years of his life, the variety and quantity of his creative activity will be found inconceivable.

During these years he gave shape to the varied creative and constructive activities at the newly founded Visva-Bharati. In 1922 he visited South India. In 1923, he went to Western India in 1924 he travelled to China, Japan, South America. In 1926 he went to Europe, in 1927 to South-East Asia, in 1929 to Canada, Japan and Indo-China. To France, England, Germany, Denmark, Russia and America in 1930, to Iran in 1932, to Ceylon in 1934, and Northern India in 1936. His creative work continued unabated despite his age and despite so much outward activity. It is as though he gathered new energy and joy at the places he visited.

The books that were published during these years number nearly seventy-five. And the songs he composed are beyond counting. He not only wrote plays of many types, he directed them and acted in them himself. Among his students at Santiniketan he infused the dance as an art form with the mature vision of his old age and transformed it into a very particular form for the expression of the divine spirit. In combining the arts of dance, song and acting, he created the Bengali dance-drama. He also introduced free verse into poetry. His poetry transcended passion and imagination, reaching a super-sensory region of the spirit. To put it simply, his language took on the power and tone of spiritual revelation.

And painting came to him. Out of his sub-conscious these paintings poured like a flock of multicoloured birds. Never before in the history of the world has a successful poet created so extensively in a sphere not his own, beginning in his old age. Rabindranath turned to painting seriously while he was abroad. In 1924, while he was in South America, ill-health drove him to seek quiet in a secluded suburb of Buenos Aires. The poems in *Puravi* were written during his convalescence. In the manuscript of *Puravi* we find that the poet, as he meditated over his words, turned the deleted passages into charming pictures and became an artist as he did so. Unknown and undreamt of things rose from the depths of his consciousness as he, half absent-mindedly, let the ink flow rhythmically from his pen. He had played many games with words and melodies. Now, as a child of over sixty years, the creation of form, out of lines and colours completely fascinated him.

In 1930, when he visited the West for the last time, his paintings were exhibited in France, England, Germany, Denmark, Russia and America. The language of his paintings differs from the language of his

poetry. The people of this country, looking for and failing to find a relationship between the two, were bewildered. Critics of art in the West, with their detached outlook, tried to seize upon the meaning of this new kind of creation. They said the poet's ignorance of the laws of paintings did not matter. These pictures, having arisen out of a deep inner necessity, have to be accepted for what they are. And in them we find the newness that is as old as eternity.

Taste changes from age to age and country to country. Style of expression changes with it. A change of this kind took place in Europe after the first World War. Rabindranath wrote his astonishing novel *Shesher Kavita* (The Poetry of the End) during this period. The book sparkles with modernity and, surprisingly, Rabindranath's eternal universalism found satisfactory expression in this new kind of writing also. Even more surprising is the fact that the style and method of composition in *Shesher Kavita* and *Yogayog*, two novels written almost at the same time, are totally different. A comparable difference exists between the stories of *Galpaguchchha* and *Laboratory*, a story written in his extreme old age. He appears not only to have kept step with the times but to have gone beyond, showing the way into what was yet to come.

His diaries record the experience he gained during his travels in Japan, Java, Russia, Iran. When he went to see countries and places, he looked at them not only with his eyes but with his heart. He sought to understand the people.

In the essays written during these years he discusses with profound insight the multiple aspects of man's self-expression, his religion, ethics, politics, social systems, education, literature, music, etc.

Through them all the primal waters of the mountain stream flow, raising ripples on the breast of the mighty river, recalling its infancy. The memory of those old days breaks through with great sweetness in nursery rhymes, poems, stories and his reminiscences. In the bungalow on the heights of Bakrota his father told him about the stars. His first raw efforts to write were made in compliance with his father's instruction to tell what he had learned about them. At the age of seventy five, at the last outpost of his life, he was still as overcome with wonder as a child by the marvellous mystery of the universe. He wrote about the stars, to which he was introduced as a child, with the hand of a master in *Visva Parichaya*.

In his preface to *Visva Parichaya* he said that the most amazing thing in the whole history of creation is the appearance of life and reason. Basing his statement on the latest discoveries of natural science, he said that the inanimate world is united to the animate world by a great and all-pervading light. What is this radiation? Is it the radiance mentioned in the *Upanishads*? The creative power of the universe? In his lectures on the Religion of Man, Rabindranath said: "Man's consciousness, like the light, diffuses itself in knowledge, in works, in emotion. In that diffusion we behold its greatness, we perceive the greatness of man."

Rabindranath said something about himself in all the various periods of his life. The events of his life are told to a greater or less extent in *Jiwan Smriti* (Memoirs), 1912 *Chhele Bela* (My Childhood Days), 1940 and in his other writings, particularly in his letters. He had told us also a little about the course of his life as a poet. These self-analytical essays and lectures have been brought together in the book *Atma-Parichaya* (A Poet's Testament), 1942. Extracts from his memoirs have been taken and strung together here in the hope that in doing so an aspect of the poet's life will be revealed which is not usually touched upon in an ordinary biography:

"Man has a life other than the life of which the body is a master. It is the life of his spirit, his *dharma*. I have felt this deep indivisible drive, the power of creation inherent in the soul, over and over again. At the very centre of my existence this creative power draws together in the flow of a single purpose all my joys and sorrows, my losses and gains, all my fragmentariness and the basic principles of my life, making one undivided meaning. What this purpose is I have discovered more or less. The god within me takes delight in manifesting himself. I am not an ascetic, nor a neophyte, nor a scholar, nor learned, nor a guru, nor a leader. I am only one thing, a poet and nothing more. I am the messenger of the beauty which is a thrill with the pure spontaneous joy of primal cosmic creation, its playmate in the game of perpetual change. Again and again I have tried to say that this creative activity of the cosmos pleases me, I like it. I have taken upon myself the task of conveying the passion behind the multiplicity which disports itself everywhere in so much variety, in music, dance, painting, colour, form, in the impact of grief, in the conflict of good and evil.

From the beginning of time, through various forgotten states, the manifest itself, in its true nature, had led me, setting me in the midst of existing creation. Unknown to me this long and great memory of the past, the stream of existence is present in me. That is why I am able to sense a deep primordial affinity, a oneness, with plants and animals and birds. When I was young I was, in my solitude united with the world of nature by necessity. But an affinity between one's own nature and the natural world brings complete satisfaction. There I have striven to unite myself to the 'I' that is greater than my 'I' by diffusing myself through the creation of universal man. This union had had to be won through conflict, through opposition, perplexity, great sorrow. By accepting my sorrows I have sought to pay my debt for my happiness. I lived where the inarticulate suffering of the village desperately sought an outlet. Such an outlet I tried to provide in the Santiniketan *ashram*, in the setting of nature's great festival, with the assistance of the earth, water and sky. The desire for expression torments the human spirit. I wished to establish knowledge on the altar of happiness. I wished to give a beneficent beauty to the great concourse of life. And just as I wished to establish a happy relationship between man and nature, I wished to make man's relationship with man, in the *ashram*, an intimate and inward one, associated with his work. This also is part of my poetry.

I have wished to touch, with intuitive perception, the immense being which unites all beings in kinship, whose pleasure in the perpetual manifestation of countless forms of variegated beauty delights my soul.

I have loved this earth, I have rendered homage to what is great, I have desired freedom, the freedom which lies in addressing oneself to the Supreme Person. I have believed that the truth of man lies in a universal humanity. At one time I offered as an oblation to this universal humanity my labour and my sacrifice, stepping beyond the confines of literary endeavour."

"I have come on pilgrimage to the shrine of this earth, a temple where the god-man is the centre of the history of all times, countries, peoples. I have poured my heart into this dust, grass, soil, shrubs and into forest giants. I am the friend of those who dwell in the lap of the earth, who are brought up by the earth, who take their first step upon the earth, and who in the end, rest in the earth. I am a poet."

A few months before his death Rabindranath said in a poem:

*Honeyed are the heavens
Honeyed is the earth
Honeyed is the dust
I have lifted them
And set them within me.
This great mantra
Is the message
Of a life fulfilled.
These sacred words, spoken
On the verge of death.
Render all loss false.
The joy of infinity prevails.
When I touch the earth for the last time
I shall say: "Thy dust hast blessed my brow."
I have seen the radiance of eternity
Behind illusory misfortune.
Truth, in joyousness.
has assumed this garb of dust.
In deference to it, because I know,
I make my obeisance in the dust.*

THE 22ND OF SRAVANA

AFTER 1935, whether for reasons of health or in compliance with Gandhiji's request, Rabindranath did not travel much. His movements were confined to Bolpur, Calcutta and Kalimpong. His life was again restricted, as it had been in childhood. The difference was that the servant Shyam was no longer present. His place was taken by time himself, the great Doorkeeper, who at the appointed hour plucks the ripened fruit from the loosened bough with pitiless tenderness. The door being shut on the outer world, Rabindranath kept his environment fresh and tolerable by repeatedly changing his residence. Three houses were built in rapid succession. Shyamali in 1935, Punasacha in 1937, Udichi in 1939. All of them were small, adapted to the needs of a person living alone.

The drums of war had sounded in the East and in the West. Japan, greedy for empire, was attacking China. The poet was deeply pained. Both these countries were Asian countries and both equally dear to him. In more than one of his letters to the Japanese poet, Noguchi, he spoke of the burning he felt in his distressed heart. In September 1938 Hitler robbed Czechoslovakia of her independence. The second World War broke out in Europe exactly a year later. When the whole civilised world was endangered by the menace of Hitler and Mussolini, the British still clung to their imperial policy and kept India ground under their feet. They refused India the freedom to fight the malefactors of her own accord. Their ungratefulness wounded Rabindranath sorely.

His struggle with illness continued. He had to come to terms with death that was approaching. Never before had he really allowed anyone to look after him, but now he was forced to surrender the care of his helpless and worn out body to doctors and nurses and attendants. At one time he had possessed full and abundant physical health. It was humiliating and insulting for him to be so defeated by old age. But of course he realised that it was his tiresome pride which made him feel that way about it. He had, by the grace of God, always been the object of love and affection. Now, in the evening of his life he, had the good

fortune to be looked after with tender and loving concern. And fear of death? He had lost it the day he recognised the invulnerability and the invincibility of his own soul.

In the course of a conversation with one of his attendants he described his state of mind at this time fully. He said: "I am alive only because I have loved the earth. At the time of my departure I shall say that I liked it that I loved it. No one can love it more. It is my good fortune to have received a great deal of love, both in my own country and abroad. Love does not come only to the deserving. Those who gave me love did so out of their own goodness. I was only the occasion. I regard myself as greatly blessed by their munificence. And I have received far more from those unrelated to me than from my own kin.

Rabindranath's eightieth birthday was celebrated in April 1941. Addressing the assembled *ashramites*, he said:

"Surrounded by you here today I wonder at the game God has played with my life. I could not dream of this until the other day. You are not what, in the conventions of common speech, is called kindred. That is why your affection is so precious. . . . Very few are as fortunate as I. Not only has love come to me from my countrymen but also friends among the learned and gifted in distant lands have also showered their love on me. I do not know what they see in me. Let me, today, take to myself all this love and all this care. Let me make my obeisance before I go to Him who has given me the right to such riches and such glory.

The address which was to be his last was read out at this birthday celebration. It was on "The Crisis in Civilisation". In the context of World War II he spoke of the imminent crisis of Western civilisation, a civilisation activated by the lashing fury of intoxicated power, greed and hatred. And he spoke of the great futility of the British administration in India. Last of all he said that it was perhaps in this impoverished and humiliated Asian country that the great man who would save the men of future generations from world-wide destruction would be born.

The function concluded with the singing of the song which announces the advent of this hero:

*The Great One Comes,
On earth the blades of grass
shiver in anticipation,
In the heavens the trumpets sound.
The dark night's fortress crumbles into dust,
Over the crest of dawn is proclaimed*

*the assurance of new life:
 "Fear not" – –
 And the great sky resounds with the hymn
 of victory to the coming of Man.*

His health gradually deteriorated. The doctors held consultations and decoded that an operation was the only remedy. On the 25th of July 1941 it was decided that Rabindranath should be taken to Calcutta. The news spread although no formal notice was given. Silently the people of the *ashram* gathered in front of his house. The poet was carried down on a stretcher. He was wearing dark glasses and his hands were folded in his lap. Without any preparation and without and pre-arrangement, everyone began to sing:

*She is in us and around us
 however far we may wander.....
 For she is our own.
 the darling of our hearts
 our Santiniketan.....*

The guru of the *ashram* listened in silence. He lifted his hands in acknowledgement. The blue bus began to move slowly away.

The operation took place at Jorasanko on the 30th July. That morning his last poem came from his lips impromptu:

*Once he finds the truth
 Washed in his own inner light
 None can deprive him of it.
 He takes it with him
 To his treasure house,
 As his last prize.*

His condition took a turn for the worse on 3rd of August. His mind clouded. On the 7th of August, 1941, the 22nd of Sravana, during the brilliance of the noonday hour, his spirit, freed from his body, was absorbed into divine bliss.

From the house in which he was born, Rabindranath set out on his last journey. Like the beads of a rosary the eighty years between the 25th of Vaisakha and the 22nd of Sravana terminated in a final knot. The 7th of August was the day of the full moon of Rakhi.

The precious fullness of a radiant life, which in uniting birth and death, bondage and freedom, tied its *rakhi* on that day, was left for all times and all countries as an imperishable heritage.

APPENDIX

The following is a list of a few selected works by Rabindranath Tagore with the year of their first publication.

Poetry

Manasi (1890), *Katha* (1900), *Kahini* (1900), *Kshanika* (1901), *Naivedya* (1901), *Kheya* (1906), *Sisu* (1909), *Gitanjali* (1910), *Balaka* (1916), *Palataka* (1918), *Lipika* (1921), *Puravi* (1925), *Punascha* (1932), *Khapchara* (1937), *Prantik* (1938), *Navajatak* (1940), *Janmadine* (1941)

Drama:

Valmiki Pratibha (1881), *Visarjan* (1890), *Baikunthar Khata* (1897), *Hasya Koutuk* (1907), *Saradostav* (1908), *Raja* (1910), *Dakghar* (1912), *Achalayatan* (1912), *Muktadhara* (1922), *Natir Pujah* (1926), *Rakta Karabi* (1926), *Tasher Desh* (1933), *Nrityanatya-Chitrangada* (1936)

Travelogue:

Europe Prabasir Patra (1881), *Japan Jatri* (1919), *Russiar Chithi* (1931)

Novels:

Chokher Bali (1903), *Gora* (1910), *Ghare Baire* (1916), *Yogayog* (1929), *Sheshar Kavita* (1929)

Essays:

Panchabhuter Diary (1897), *Vichitra Prabandha* (1907), *Charitra Pujah* (1907), *Sahitya* (1907), *Samuha* (1908), *Swadesh* (1908), *Samaj* (1908), *Siksha* (1908), *Sabda Tattwa* (1909), *Dharma* (1909), *Manusher Dharma* (1933), *Bharat Pathik Ram Mohan*

roy (1933), Santiniketan (1935), Chhanda (1936), Kalantar (1937), Visva Parichaya (1937), Banglar Bhasha Parichaya (1938), Sabhyatar Sankat (1941)

Memoirs & Letters:

Jivan Smriti (1912), Chhinna Patra (1912), Bhanu Singher Patrabali (1930), Chhele Bela (1940), Atmaparichaya (1943)

Paintings:

Chitralipi Vol. I (1940), Chitralipi Vol. II (1951)

Stories:

Galpaguchchha (1900), Galpa Salpa (1941)

Songs:

Gitabitan (1931)



Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was a poet, philosopher, artist, playwright, composer and novelist who reshaped Bengal's literature and music. As the author of "Gitanjali", Tagore became the first non-European and first Indian to have won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. His poetry when translated was viewed as spiritual and sensitive. He composed and scored India's national anthem- '*Jana gana mana*'.

In this book the author Kshitis Roy takes a look at Tagore's life from birth to death. With his simple language he makes the book interesting for both the children and the adults, who get in-depth details of Tagore's life.



PUBLICATIONS DIVISION

MINISTRY OF INFORMATION AND BROADCASTING
GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

Price : ₹ 120.00



ISBN 978-81-230-1764-8
BIO-ENG-REP-02-2012-13